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## Claiming Citizenship: Las Vegas' Conventional Women's Organizations Establishing Citizenship Through Civic Engagement

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CLAIMING CITIZENSHIP: LAS VEGAS' CONVENTIONAL WOMEN'S  
ORGANIZATIONS ESTABLISHING CITIZENSHIP THROUGH  
CIVIC ENGAGEMENT

by

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Bachelor of Arts in History  
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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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## ABSTRACT

### **Claiming Citizenship: Las Vegas Conventional Women's Organizations Establishing Citizenship Through Civic Engagement**

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Many historians of American women portray women's organized civic engagement and work to attain social, economic, and legal equality as feminism. American feminism has been expanded and applied in scholarship. The American feminists of the 1960s wanted to alter the male power structure and redefine conventional notions of womanhood. However, many middle-class women who participated in community and civic organizations valued their roles as wives, mothers, and homemakers, expressing their citizenship and community work as an extension of these roles. Their motivation in pursuing equality was to gain full citizenship status.

In this thesis, I argue that viewing women's civic engagement as expressions of citizenship based on traditional familial relationships, rather than feminism, broadens our ability to identify and interpret how middle-class women in Las Vegas understood their roles as citizens of their community and their country between 1911 and 1970. This study examines four women's organizations in Las Vegas: The Mesquite Club, The Las Vegas Business and Professional Women's Club, the Service League, and the Las Vegas chapter of the League of Women Voters spanning sixty years of Las Vegas history. Each organization is an affiliate of a national federation, comprised of traditional women who exerted and claimed citizenship through various methods of civic engagement and

community building.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

Women's organizations flourished during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries when more often than not even the smallest town contained women's clubs.<sup>1</sup> The seeds for women's clubs were sown in the 1780s when church women organized sewing circles and charitable groups.<sup>2</sup> By the mid-nineteenth century, women developed a public presence and power base through their work in single-gendered organizations. Historians' examinations of women's organized activism highlight various areas in which women became empowered within these associations. Besides serving as a vehicle for women to exert public influence, historians considered how class, race, gender, sexuality, and culture influenced ways in which women interacted with their communities. Most frequently, historians situate women's involvement in public affairs and demands for equality within feminist theory and view them as a bridge between the suffrage and women's liberation movements.<sup>3</sup> These perspectives illuminate ways in which women perceived and responded to their various communities during various periods in history. Yet the majority of women did not identify with feminism, but saw themselves as traditional women as well as citizens. Their goals and motivations can be described

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<sup>1</sup> Sandra Haarsager, *Organized Womanhood: Cultural Politics in the Pacific Northwest, 1840-1920* (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1997), 102-104.

<sup>2</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, Simon and Schuster, Inc. 1997), 56-57.

<sup>3</sup> For a small sampling of historiography connecting women's civic organizations to feminist movements, see Kirsten Delegard, "Women's Movements, 1880s-1920s" in Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *A Companion to American Women's History* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 329-344; for various perspectives about women's organizations, see Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc, 1980) who links the rising women's club movement to suffrage; and Kathleen Laughlin and Jacqueline Casteldine, eds., *Breaking The Wave: Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1947-1985* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2011) who interpret women's organized activities during the Cold War as a strain of feminism and a bridge to the Women's Liberation Movement in the 1960s.

within their understanding of themselves as traditional women. This study evaluates the traditional women's perception of themselves as citizens.

In this thesis, I submit that examining women's civic activism as a function of citizenship offers a broad and inclusive perspective for identifying and interpreting how women understood and exercised their responsibilities as women and citizens of their community and the nation. By examining four women's organizations in Las Vegas: the Mesquite Club of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, the Service League (which later became affiliated with the Junior League), the Las Vegas Federation of Business and Professional Women's Club, and the League of Women Voters of the Las Vegas Valley, I will demonstrate how women who upheld social constructions of gender exerted civic authority and pursued full citizenship in Las Vegas. The study spans the years from the start of the Mesquite Club in 1911 during the women's suffrage movement to 1970 and the rise of the Women's Liberation Movement. Each group is comprised of primarily middle-class and upper-middle class, white, women who had a strong sense of purpose as women and as citizens. These women not only influenced the shaping of Las Vegas community, but many worked to remove barriers that prevented women from being recognized fully as citizens.

I will first review women's legal position as citizens of the state, followed by how their understandings of womanhood affected their attitudes and beliefs about their public obligations. Despite challenges to women's place within the established social order in the 1920s and deviations from traditional women's roles during times of war, the women in this study maintained the basic structure of themselves as homemakers and men as breadwinners well into the twentieth century. Adhering to these standards did not

prevent them from demanding equal status as citizens. I will then examine how the women's associations asserted themselves nationally and locally. Each organization demonstrates a different expression of gendered citizenship. The Mesquite Club exemplifies maternalism; the Service League demonstrates feminine charity; the Las Vegas Business and Professional Women focused primarily on economic equality while maintaining that as women they brought unique perspectives to leadership roles; and the League of Women Voters of the Las Vegas Valley stressed civic responsibility through voter education and social justice. Through their work, they helped build and sustain the Las Vegas community in ways that differed from but complemented male-dominated politics.

This study focuses on the middle-class elite women in Las Vegas, Nevada, and their struggle for recognition as full citizens within the domain of womanhood. These women, the majority of whom were native-born, are categorized as middle-class elite because they attended college at a time when most women, especially those without financial means, did not, and they married into or came from families of professionals, entrepreneurs, or affluence. They are not synonymous with the wealthy, elite classes of the major urban centers, and would most likely not have been included in those upper class inner circles. Unlike the densely populated urban centers that had definite class divisions, Las Vegas was a small, frontier town throughout most of the time frame covered in this study. Within the Las Vegas hierarchy, women who belonged to the organizations examined in this study were mostly part of the more prominent and affluent network of Las Vegas society. For efficiency's sake, usage of the term, "middle-class" is understood to mean women from the more prominent or middle-class families in Las

Vegas. They believed that as women and citizens they had a specific role in American society and politics, that what they did mattered, and that they deserved to be recognized as full and independent citizens, a quest that continued through the first half of the twentieth century.

This analysis examines the middle-class elite white women for various reasons. First and most important is that early notions of citizenship were reserved for elite white males. When creating this nation, full, active rights of citizenship were reserved mostly for the propertied classes. Voting, holding political office, jury service, property rights, and education were by and large the rights of propertied men. Second, ideals of womanhood were directed to the women from the same class. Women, especially married women, were legally “covered” by men and had no direct relationship with the state.<sup>4</sup> Additionally, qualities of femininity reinforced by external influences such as law, religion, and culture, promoted upper-class attributes of gentility and humility as the universal standard of womanhood. Finally, although working class women came together to improve their living and labor conditions, it was the middle-class elite women who most successfully created national organizations that enabled them to manipulate traditional womanhood into a sphere of power that influenced civic and political matters and, ultimately, became a forum to demand equal rights as citizens.

Scholarship regarding citizenship explores its meanings in terms of culture, status, rights, and obligations. Studies about women and citizenship frequently focus on how the state marginalized women citizens, but women perceived themselves as worthy citizens, and in the early twentieth century, often called on maternalist politics to influence public

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<sup>4</sup> Linda K. Kerber, “The Meanings of Citizenship.” *The Journal of American History*, 84 (December 1977), 843-846; Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States 1942-Present* (New York: Harper Perennial Modern Classics, 2005), 90-91.

policy.<sup>5</sup> Through their organizations, they displayed an unwavering sense that they had a responsibility to improve their society and that they did important work. They also realized that they were not accorded full standing as citizens.

Markers of citizenship such as suffrage, jury service, and ownership of property and earnings, were not fully extended to women. According to Gretchen Ritter, the Nineteenth Amendment did not confer full citizenship upon women because they were prohibited from serving on juries and they did not hold independent status as citizens.<sup>6</sup> In comparing the Fifteenth and Nineteenth Amendments to the U.S. Constitution, Ritter observes that suffrage, granted to African American males only, carried other rights inherent in citizenship, such as the right to serve on a jury. Even after passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, women were regularly excluded from jury duty or given liberal exemptions. They did not attain legal equality in employment until the passage of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which then strengthened their arguments for equal pay, jury service, and the fight for passage of an Equal Rights Amendment.<sup>7</sup>

Historians affirm that women participated in American politics and society throughout the nation's existence. Women boycotted against the Crown during the Revolution, nursed and cared for wounded patriots, and some were attacked and raped by British soldiers. Women worked in mills, during early industrialization and some formed

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<sup>5</sup> Margot Canady, *The Straight State Sexuality and Citizenship in Twentieth-Century America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 7-10 (n. 19-25); Kerber, "The Meanings of Citizenship," 833-854; Gayle Gullett. "Constructing the Woman Citizen and Struggling for the Vote in California, 1896-1911," *The Pacific Historical Review* 69 (Nov. 2000): 573-593; Jan Doolittle Wilson. *The Women's Joint Congressional Committee and the Politics of Maternalism 1920-30* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 2007) examined gendered citizenship and women's maternalism in shaping public policy.

<sup>6</sup> Gretchen Ritter, "Gender and Citizenship After the Nineteenth Amendment," *Polity* 32 (Spring 2000): 345-375.

<sup>7</sup> Susan M. Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 61-66. Hartmann explains the efforts of ACLU attorneys Dorothy Kenyon and Pauli Murray to persuade the Supreme Court to include equal protection for women under the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

unions. Women were aware of civic matters and participated in events of their time and place, yet they were not recognized as full citizens under law. When she told her husband John to “remember the ladies” while creating laws for the new nation, Abigail Adams warned that without representation, women would not feel obligated to obey laws in which they had no voice.<sup>8</sup> This plea signified a beginning of a long quest for women to attain full citizenship. The absence of legal recognition did not diminish women’s involvement in building the nation. Women, especially those from the middle and elite classes, carved a public space that was consistent with their gender role.

The white male establishment, through religion, law, and custom, dictated standards of gender behavior, defined who would be recognized as a citizen, and established rules of employment for gender, class, and race. Both clergy and political leaders tasked women with raising virtuous citizens for the new nation. In the early nineteenth century, the Second Great Awakening and rise of industrialism with its associated class divisions situated women within the home to function as homemaker, mother, and nurturer, a role which dominated gender distinctions for more than a century.<sup>9</sup> Over the course of the nineteenth century, some women used their role as traditional women to enter into civic endeavors such as working for abolition of slavery, eradication of prostitution, and temperance. Many Christian women went into missionary work, while others worked to improve public health and cleanliness, education, social justice, and social work. Frequently, they served as unpaid public agents, saving municipalities substantial costs.

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<sup>8</sup> Jan E. Lewis, “A Revolution for Whom? Women in the Era of the American Revolution” in Nancy A. Hewitt, ed., *A Companion to American Women’s History* (Molden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd., 2005), 88.

<sup>9</sup> Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 66-72; Catherine Kelly, “Gender and Class Formations” in *A Companion to American Women’s History* (Molden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, Ltd. 2005), 109-111.

Women were not directly involved in the political process and could not vote, but politicians recognized female influence. Partisan political campaigns often played to women's interests, signifying an acknowledgement that women did have an interest in civic matters and carried some weight in the outcome of political elections.<sup>10</sup> Their power did not warrant full citizenship, but through their club work women expanded their involvement in public life and affected public discourse and policy.

In the nineteenth century, many traditional women claimed civic engagement through organized club work as part of the female domain that some historians credit to the Second Great Awakening, industrialization, and urbanization.<sup>11</sup> Anne Firor Scott traces women's organizations to the mid-nineteenth century women's religious and benevolent associations. Karen Blair, Daphne Spain and Peggy Pascoe demonstrate women's gradual expansion into the public sphere and policy during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century through municipal housekeeping and moral authority. These groups were comprised primarily of white, middle class, native-born, women. Concurrently, many educated African American women attempted to elevate their race as well as their status as women. While increasingly sure of their civic duty as women, they knew that laws and customs prevented them from exercising full rights as citizens.<sup>12</sup>

They used their role as homemakers and mothers to claim citizenship through community

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<sup>10</sup>Lewis, "A Revolution for Whom?," 87-90; Kelly, "Gender and Class Formations," 109-111.

<sup>11</sup> Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 72-73; Kelly, *Gender and Class Formations*, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Woman's Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois, 1992); Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*; Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue The Search for Moral Authority in American West, 1874-1939* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000). These works describe women's engagement in civic life through organized activism from benevolent societies, religious engagement such as temperance, abolitionism, missionary work in the American West, and the transformation from women's literary clubs to civic improvements and community building, anti-lynching campaigns, through organizations such as the General Federation of Women's Clubs in the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

service and activism while steadfastly pursuing the elimination of discriminatory legislation. When the Women's Liberation Movement demanded equality, some traditional women's associations supported the coalition in order to obtain full recognition of citizenship, not only nationally, but within the local community.

Traditional, middle-class women's civic organizations remained popular through the greater portion of the twentieth century. Professional associations also emerged in the early twentieth century as more women attended college and pursued careers. Professional organizations were involved in traditional women's community projects, but their primary agenda was to attain equal career opportunities and earnings. Concurrent with a growing presence in civic enterprises and professional careers was an ever-stronger demand for women's suffrage and equal rights as citizens. The quest for full citizenship and equality did not end with suffrage but continued through the twentieth century as these women demanded recognition of their contributions and a voice in shaping public policy and the associated civil rights.

Property ownership, inextricably linked to citizenship, is safeguarded under the Fifth and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. Yet, by law, husbands legally controlled all property and earnings, a fluid form of property. Women's coalitions began to force changes in the law in specific states, but in many states, including Nevada, men controlled women's property and wages as upcoming chapters will illuminate. Identifying earnings as one of the pillars of citizenship, Nancy MacLean emphasized the importance of economic parity as a condition of equal American rights. Restricted access to earnings limits opportunities for self-determination and security, creating a stigma of



non-personhood on those who are economically dependent.<sup>13</sup> Middle-class women were historically limited in work opportunities and earnings available to them, and the married women, especially, were often prevented from working for pay.<sup>14</sup> The institutional and legal barriers did not diminish these women's sense of citizenship. They felt and exhibited national pride in the welfare of their country and community just as men did and expressed it through gendered terms.

The standard for white, middle-class womanhood remained marriage, home, and motherhood to the Cold War years of the mid-twentieth century, but many women stretched the limits of private space. In the Progressive years, they justified public engagement and reformist activities as an extension of housekeeping, motherhood, and moral authority. Traditional women often relied on these same claims during the Cold War when attempting to contribute to government policies. Flappers and college graduates of the twenties who expected to combine careers with marriage, rejected notions of moral authority in favor of equality, an approach that professional women followed for decades after, but did not reject marriage or motherhood.

Gender divisions softened in times of war, especially during World War II when women were recruited to fill "men's" jobs while the males were in combat.<sup>15</sup> Many women's colleges offered courses in auto repair, map reading, and officer training, traditionally considered masculine studies, as part of their contribution to the war effort. These exceptions did not permanently alter the established gender divide. During the Depression, employed married women were expected to relinquish their jobs to male

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<sup>13</sup> Nancy MacLean, *Freedom is Not Enough* (Russell Sage Foundation, 2006), 6-7.

<sup>14</sup> Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*, 73-76.

<sup>15</sup> William H. Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: Women in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 113,123.

breadwinners. “Rosie the Riveter” was reminded that she was a soldier’s wife, mother, or girlfriend and was filling his place until he returned home. Women who worked in war factories were frequently assigned housekeeping duties. Those who were assigned and trained to do men’s work were usually paid less and were not promoted to positions of authority over men.<sup>16</sup> In the Cold War years, women were told to return to the home and to resume their responsibilities as homemaker and mother in the name of public security. For many middle-class women, suburbanization created a new geographic division of spheres. Both sexes adhered to the basic gender constructions,<sup>17</sup> and civic-minded middle-class women who did not disturb the status quo relied on volunteer organizations and maternalism to assert their citizenship and work to improve and elevate their legal status.<sup>18</sup>

Viewing women’s civic engagement as an expression of citizenship offers a broad and inclusive context for understanding the many ways in which women integrated gender with citizenship. From the old English law of “femme coverture” to the Cold War, married women were legally subordinate to their husbands.<sup>19</sup> They were, however, expected to safeguard and transmit citizenship, democracy, and middle class culture by maintaining good homes and raising patriotic citizens. This role was internalized by women from republican mothers of the nascent nation to the defenders of democracy and

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<sup>16</sup> Amy Kesselman, *Fleeting Opportunities: Women Shipyard Workers in Portland and Vancouver During World War II and Reconversion*. (Albany, New York: State University of New York Press, 1990), 3, 33-40.

<sup>17</sup> Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, 1-3; Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*, 107-111; Evans, *Born For Liberty*, 194, 202, 230-233. These works describe gender roles and the general adherence to these roles by both sexes.

<sup>18</sup> Kathleen Laughlin and Jacqueline Casteldine, eds., *Breaking the Wave: Women, Their Organizations and Feminism, 1947-1985* (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2011). See for ways in which women’s groups functioned during the Cold War.

<sup>19</sup> Linda K. Kerber and Jane Sherron de Hart, eds. *Women’s America Refocusing the Past 6<sup>th</sup> Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004) 13; Kerber, “The Meanings of Citizenship,” 839.

national security in Cold War America.<sup>20</sup> Many traditional, middle-class women exhibited citizenship and gained community influence through their civic organizations.

Civic engagement gave these women a voice in public concerns by claiming issues regarding public health, charity, morality, and human welfare as women's purview.<sup>21</sup> Organizational work gave women social power and a way to develop leadership skills in endeavors that did not compete with men.<sup>22</sup> Claiming moral authority and domestic housekeeping, women entered the public foray in areas consistent with their role as helpmate and complementary to the men, who were concerned with government and commerce. From their position as the nurturers of society and community, women argued that equal standing as citizenship was necessary for them to fulfill their obligations and service as women citizens. Through this portal, women who followed the traditional ideals of femaleness attempted to correct limiting legislation and advance women's status locally and nationally.

As contemporary historians explore women's associations in the context of local settings, more focused perspectives of class, gendered citizenship, reformist politics, and feminism emerge. The League of Women Voters, the most frequently studied organization, is becoming recognized for their early involvement in the Civil Rights Movement and grassroots environmentalism. Scholars are understanding The General Federation of Women's Clubs' reliance on maternalism to equate home with community and to transmit middle-class values and citizenship, while the Junior League is studied

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<sup>20</sup> Evans, *Born for Liberty*, 94-97, 127, 140; Gayle Gullett, "Constructing the Woman Citizen and Struggling for the Vote in California, 1896-1911," *The Pacific Historical Review* 69 (Nov. 2000): 574, 576; Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound American Families in the Cold War Era* (Basic Books, 1999), xx-xxi; 11, 17.

<sup>21</sup> Anastasia Sims, *The Power of Femininity in the New South: Women's Organizations and Politics in North Carolina, 1880-1930* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 1997), 51.

<sup>22</sup> Diana Kendall, *The Power of Good Deeds: Privileged Women and the Social Reproduction of the Upper Class* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2002), 2, 26-27.

through the lens of upper class responsibility to help those in need. Most studies are framed within the Progressive Era or the Cold War period. One study of the Mississippi Federation of Business and Professional is a longitudinal study which explains the members' activism as a form of social feminism.<sup>23</sup>

Studies of Nevada women are also surfacing. Anita Ernst Watson's *Into their Own: Nevada Women Emerging into Public Life*, an abbreviated history of women in Nevada, serves as a springboard for further inspection of women in Nevada's communities. She covers women's organizations in the context of suffrage and legal reform to benefit women economically.<sup>24</sup> Cydnee R. McMullen's "Work Worth Doing: Nevada Women's Clubs and the Creation of Community, 1860-1920" focuses on women

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<sup>23</sup> Debra Lynne Northart, "The League of Women Voters in Mississippi – The Civil Rights Years, 1954-1964", (Ph.D. diss., University of Mississippi, 1997) ProQuest (9816976); Rodney Clare, "The Activist Non-Partisan: The North Carolina League of Women Voters, 1947-1979" (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2001) ProQuest (3041569); and "Resisting 'the Doldrums': The League of Women Voters in North Carolina in the 1950s," *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 86 (April 2009): 180-207. These works discuss involvement in the Civil Rights Movement. Terrienne K. Shulte, "Grassroots at the Water's Edge: The League of Women Voters and the Struggle to Save Lake Erie 1956-1970" (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 2006) ProQuest (3226676); Terrienne K. Shulte, "Citizen Experts: The League of Women Voters and Environmental Conservation," *Frontier: A Journal of Women Studies* 30, (September 2009): 1-29. Shulte links the League of Women Voters to environmentalism. Priscilla G. Maasimac, "A Neglected Partnership General Federation of Women's Clubs and Conservation, 1890-1920" (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1997) ProQuest (9737425); Sandra Jeanne Johnson, "Early Conservation by the Arizona Federation of Women's Clubs, 1900-1932" (M.S. thesis, University of Arizona, 1993) ProQuest (1356795) explore the contributions of the General Federation of Women's Clubs to conservation and environmentalism. Kristin White, "Training a Nation: The General Federation of Women's Clubs: Rhetorical Education and American Citizenship" (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 2010) ProQuest (3429649); Paige Meltzer, "'The Pulse and Conscience of America': The General Federation and Women's Citizenship, 1945-1960," *Frontier: A Journal of Women Studies* 30 (September 2009): 52-76 discusses the ways women employed maternalist politics and Americanism to influence pedagogy. Salli Vargis, "History of the Mississippi Federation of Business and Professional Women, 1924-1995" (Ph.D. diss., Mississippi State University, 2004) ProQuest (3133959) describes the organization through the lens of social feminism. Barry M. Franklin, "Women's Voluntarism, Special Education, and the Junior League: 'Social Motherhood' in Atlanta, 1961-1968," *History of Education* 29 (September 2000): 415-428; Elise Chenier, "Class, Gender, and the Social Standard: The Montreal Junior League, 1920-1939," *The Canadian Historical Review* 9 (2009): 671-710; Sara Deutsch, *Women and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Maureen A Flanagan, *Seeing with their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). These works discuss women's activism in terms of class and gender.

<sup>24</sup> Anita Ernst Watson, *Into Their Own: Nevada Women Emerging Into Public Life* (Reno: Nevada Humanities Committee, 2000), 82, 103, 113.

as community builders. She devotes the bulk of her study to Reno's Twentieth Century Club, Goldfield's Goldfield Women's Club, and Las Vegas' Mesquite Club. The clubs created a Nevada Federation of Women's Clubs and also belonged to the General Federation of Women's Clubs network. McMullen contests assertions that building community was a gendered activity, and demonstrates that men were equally concerned and worked in collaboration with women.<sup>25</sup> Since both works are centered in Nevada's early history, they emphasize work performed in northern Nevada. Caryll Batt Dzedziak's study of the campaign to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in Nevada and the leadership role of the League of Women Voters examines women in southern Nevada and offers individual self-perceptions of gender roles and citizenship held by some of the members.<sup>26</sup> Combined, the studies offer snippets of women's civic engagement in Nevada, with little focus on Las Vegas.

This thesis offers a longitudinal study of middle-class elite women's organizations in Las Vegas, and how these women perceived themselves within the context of their gender, time, and culture. It also becomes apparent that while they held to traditional gender ideals, they were not monolithic. Similarities and differences in missions and goals, including building community, advocating for women in business and professions, philanthropic causes, and social justice signify the diverse perspectives from which women approached civic and political engagement. The study also briefly introduces women's civic engagement in Las Vegas' African American community, opening the door to further exploration of these women. Examining women's activism adds

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<sup>25</sup>Cydnee R. McMullen, "Work Worth Doing: Nevada Women's Clubs and the Creation of Community, 1860-1920" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nevada, Reno, 2003) ProQuest (3099685).

<sup>26</sup>Caryll Batt Dzedziak, "The Gendering of Nevada Politics: The ERA ratification campaign 1973-1981" (Ph.D. diss., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2010) ProQuest (3439990).

dimension to Las Vegas history as well as clarity in understanding gendered expressions of citizenship.

In practice, women expressed their citizenship through patriotism, civic engagement, social work, and political involvement. One way in which women demonstrated patriotism was in preserving American traditions and heritage. Michael Kammen acknowledges that women proudly displayed their patriotism through various organizations and historical preservation endeavors. This work coincided with their role as women and caretakers of the country's heritage and values and was an expression of citizenship that they deemed complementary but equal to men. In 1892, Susan B. Anthony petitioned the mayor of New York City to dedicate a building in the upcoming world's fair to honor women by showcasing them "as a helpmeet worthy of a man."<sup>27</sup> In the first half of the twentieth century, women demonstrated their patriotism by supporting wartime and civil defense efforts through gendered work like Red Cross, conservation drives, and war bond sales. Civic engagement, a responsibility of all citizens, fostered national solidarity and patriotism. The women's formal organizations that began in the nineteenth century gave women a unified sense of purpose and a strong collective voice as they expanded women's work into the public domain.

Women in each of the organizations being studied: the Mesquite Club, Service League, Las Vegas Business and Professional Women's Club, and the League of Women Voters of the Las Vegas Valley exhibited citizenship through civic engagement. All associations focused in varying degrees on works for the betterment of the Las Vegas community in the traditional feminine model. They also worked to eliminate legislation that limited women's rights and status as citizens. These women identified with the

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<sup>27</sup> Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993), 266-267.

qualities ascribed to traditional, middle-class elite women and believed that as women and citizens, it was their duty to use their womanhood to improve the community as they improved the home. The study spans sixty years, from the early Las Vegas community in 1907 through 1970 when the women's movement was in full stride. During these years, understandings of women's roles as wife and mother were essentially constant.

The thesis is organized thematically and chronologically. Chapters One and Two explore the service organizations: the Mesquite Club and the Service League. Chapter One covers the Mesquite Club, and follows the ways in which women in early Las Vegas shaped public affairs, created social standards, and lobbied for removal of laws that limited women's rights as citizens. From its inception in 1911 through the Cold War years, they exerted authority from their roles as mothers. Chapter Two, The Service League, explores how the Las Vegas middle-class elite perceived their roles as citizens who had an obligation to care for the needy in the community. In exercising this responsibility, they also assisted in delivering social services that state and local entities failed to fund. This group did not typically become involved legislative activities, but they did lobby for increased aid to dependent children and funding for services to the blind.

Chapters Three and Four investigate the more politically involved associations: the Las Vegas Business and Professional Women's Club (LVBPW) and the League of Women Voters of the Las Vegas Valley. Chapter Three examines the efforts of the Business and Professional Women to improve the struggle of wage-earning women for recognition as equal contributors in the community. Organized in 1931, they directed their activities toward elevating the status of working women. As wage earners, they

were more inclined toward political engagement in economic endeavors, but they also mentored young girls and women in business and the professions. The Federation of Business and Professional Women spearheaded the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women in Nevada. Chapter Four studies the League of Women Voters of the Las Vegas Valley, an organization that was solely dedicated to political and civic improvement in the community. Since the group was not formed until 1964, this is an abbreviated depiction of the League's work, which was remarkable. They were active in the environmental concerns, the Civil Rights Movement in Las Vegas, and they are the only organization in this study that was integrated. They were also instrumental in designating Red Rock as a state park. Finally, they took the lead in the campaign to pass the Equal Rights Amendment in Nevada during the late Seventies. This section also introduces the African American women's organizations that attempted to elevate race as well as citizenship for their population, a topic which deserves further investigation. The League of Women Voters' study and data supporting the need for day care services for working women were included in the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women.

Commonalities among groups emerge from this study. Both the Mesquite Club and Service League had close ties to social sororities like Beta Sigma Psi. Many of the members of the Business and Professional League and the League of Women Voters also belonged to the American Association of University Women. The women in each of the associations also were involved in other community groups, including Red Cross, Community Chest, church groups, the PTA, and women's auxiliaries. Each group is an affiliate of a larger national federation, whose membership is comprised of women who expressed a strong sense of their roles as women and citizens, complementary but equal



to men. With the exception of the League of Women Voters, each group, including the African American women's organizations,<sup>28</sup> developed programs and scholarships for young girls. The Mesquite Club, Service League, and LVBPW each nominated candidates for the Girls State summer citizenship training camp sponsored by the American Legion. The Mesquite Club, Service League, and African American Les Femmes Douze sponsored cotillions geared to instill community values and citizenship among the youth. Les Femmes Douze continues today.

All groups weighed in on political issues affecting women, some to greater degrees than others, and each group provided volunteer social or civic work. This study expands our knowledge of Las Vegas history and the important ways in which women created a sustainable community while also pursuing equal rights as citizens.

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<sup>28</sup> Known African American women's groups include Les Femmes Douze, an organization designed to mold young African American women; the Links, a national philanthropic organization; and African American sororities, Alpha Kappa Alpha and Delta Sigma Theta.

## Chapter 2

### The Mesquite Club: Citizens Who Built a Community

The women who helped build the early Las Vegas community influenced political, social, and moral systems and acquired a measure of power and control. They led city beautification projects and campaigns for sanitation, public health, and children's health and education, often in collaboration with the men. They voted, ran for local public office, and lobbied local and state elected officials on behalf of women's rights such as an increase in women's wages, eight-hour work days, removal of legal restrictions on married women's property rights, and independent citizenship for married women. This chapter demonstrates how women in the Mesquite Club claimed citizenship by expanding their world view, exerting control in their society, and working consciously to advance women's status without challenging their identification as wives and mothers.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, women's clubs were indelibly affixed to American culture, and the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) was among the largest networks. Through club work, civic-minded, middle-class women eased into the public sphere and feminized urban spaces.<sup>1</sup> More importantly, a national network emerged, giving women a new vision of their future, and the confidence and skills needed to promote that vision. By the end of the nineteenth century, clubwomen supported suffrage and concerned themselves with legislation dealing with equitable divorce,

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<sup>1</sup> Karen Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, Peggy Pascoe, *Relations of Rescue*, Daphne Spain, *How Women Saved the City*, Sarah Deutsch *Women and the City: Gender, Space and Power in Boston, 1870-1940* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Maureen Flanagan *Seeing with their Hearts: Chicago Women and the Vision of the Good City, 1871-1933* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002). These works discuss how urban women used municipal housekeeping and moral authority to expand the domestic sphere into public spaces and to transmit middle class values to lower classes and non-native women.

property and parental rights, women's labor issues, and other matters affecting the general well-being of women and family. Their strong sense of purpose as caretakers of the community motivated them to improve their society through civic engagement. By the twentieth century, club work was the primary avenue through which American middle-class women shaped policy. They carried their club culture with them wherever they lived, organizing clubs in communities where there were none.<sup>2</sup>

In the early twentieth century, a small but steadily increasing number of middle-class women attended college, and put their education to practical use through affiliation with women's clubs. Communities with any sizeable middle-class female population were almost certain to have a club affiliated with the GFWC network.<sup>3</sup> In the process, clubwomen built communities that helped sustain western cities and towns, especially in the Progressive Era of the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century when much of the Rocky Mountain and Pacific West developed.

In 1914, the GFWC boasted that their club network, which began "as a cultural movement, and as such, was criticized, ridiculed or encouraged according to the state of mind or powers of observation of the critic,"<sup>4</sup> was recognized as a community asset. As the club movement grew, "father, mother, and children became enthusiastic over the subject and interest spreads to neighbors, friends, men's clubs and street corners until that which was begun timidly and with serious apprehension at a club meeting ends in a

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<sup>2</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies, Women's Associations in American History* traces women's long history of organized engagement in the nineteenth century from benevolent societies of the mid-nineteenth century to the women's club movement at the end of the century.

<sup>3</sup> Mary I. Wood and Mrs. Percy V. Pennybacker. "Civic Activities of Women's Clubs," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 56 (November 1914): 80.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

community interest sufficient to revolutionize public opinion and to bring about real reform”<sup>5</sup> as women carved out their place in the public arena.

By 1923, the GFWC boasted a network of over 13,000 chapters throughout the country.<sup>6</sup> Individual clubs applied the federation’s core themes of beautification, sanitation, and civic service to their local communities. Beautification began with community “clean-up” days, backyard improvements, then expanded to planting small trees and greenery in open squares or parks, and eventually led to demands for public sanitation and public health improvements. Clearing alleys of debris, instituting regular garbage collection, campaigns to eliminate the housefly, advocating for thorough testing of cattle, medical inspection of school children, anti-tuberculosis campaigns and safeguarding public morality all came under the women’s purview.<sup>7</sup> Whatever their mission, clubwomen relied on their roles as homemakers and mothers to build community and claim citizenship.

Women in Nevada enthusiastically participated in the club movement. In 1894, Reno started the Twentieth Century Club “for the purpose of broadening cultivation and promotion of the public welfare”<sup>8</sup> and joined the GFWC in 1897. They undertook the standard activities of clubwomen: worked for cleanliness and sanitation, established kindergartens, and performed works of community charity, much of which was performed in collaboration with Reno men. Reno clubwomen also joined co-gender organizations like the Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals and participated

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>6</sup> Lucetta C. Chase, “The Social Program of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. One Index of Fifty Years of Progress,” *Journal of Social Forces* 1 (May, 1923): 466.

<sup>7</sup> Wood and Pennybacker, 85.

<sup>8</sup> Cydnee McMullen, “Work Worth Doing: Nevada Women’s Clubs and the Creation of Community, 1860-1920,” 90.

in the juvenile court system. Goldfield women organized in 1903 “to stimulate intellectual development, advance philanthropic and reformatory efforts and aid in civic betterment of the community.”<sup>9</sup> One of their founders, Mrs. Charles Sprague, became a charter member of the Mesquite Club when she and her husband moved to Las Vegas. Yerington and other Nevada towns started clubs, prompting the Reno Twentieth Century Club to start a Nevada federation in 1908. The federation had two districts. District 1 included Northern Nevada cities of Reno, Goldfield, and Yerington, while District 2 included southern Nevada’s Lincoln County and in 1909, Clark County. As a collective, they successfully lobbied the state legislature to fund a school for delinquent boys and to pass legislation abolishing a father’s right to will guardianship of unborn children away from their mothers.<sup>10</sup>

By 1919, the women’s clubs proliferated throughout Nevada, and the state federation increased to three Districts: District 1 added Elko, White Pine, Eureka, Landis, and Humboldt counties; District 2 was comprised of Lincoln, Clark, and eastern Nye counties, including Searchlight, Panaca, Logandale, Overton, and Las Vegas; and District 3 contained West Nevada, Pershing, and Churchill counties.<sup>11</sup> Under the state federation, clubwomen worked for state funding for libraries, more responsible oversight of adoption regulations, financial assistance for children, and property rights and individual citizenship for women. The Mesquite Club joined the federation soon after it was organized.

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 241.

<sup>11</sup> Meeting Minutes, 14 November 1919, Mesquite Club Records, box 2, folder 13, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas. (hereinafter cited as MCR).

In 1906 Las Vegas was a fledgling town with rutted dirt roads and wooden plank walkways. Other than cotton and pecan tree farms, there was little vegetation to protect residents from the hot, harsh summer sun or desert dust storms. The town had no electricity or plumbing and the water supply came from underground aquifers known as artesian wells. The pending arrival of the railroad in Las Vegas prompted people like Charles and Delphine Squires to move to Las Vegas, hoping to capitalize on the economic opportunities. After settling into their house on Fremont Street between 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Street, Delphine Squires proceeded to build a home and community for herself and her family. As many women of her class and generation, she was active in civic endeavors. She organized a Mother's Club, a forerunner to the Parent Teachers Associations, when she lived in Los Angeles, and was involved in the GFWC when she resided in Los Angeles and San Bernardino, California. As soon as the population in Las Vegas permitted, she helped start the Mesquite Club.

Delphine Squires, Frances Dunlap Farnsworth, Mrs. Charles Sprague, and Esther Kelsey Givens, organized the Mesquite Club and held their first meeting on February 10, 1911. Longtime Las Vegas resident and rancher, Helen Stewart, restless for social service, was one of the first members. It was her suggestion to name the club for the mesquite trees that were indigenous to the area, and she gave the organization a gavel which she carved from the bark of one of the mesquite trees on her ranch. In addition to their membership in the Mesquite Club, the women participated in many other community endeavors such as church groups and Sunday school instruction, the Red Cross, Parent Teacher Associations (PTA), and the Eastern Star, the women's auxiliary of the Masons which created a network of community assets.

The women embodied values held by upwardly mobile, white, middle-class Americans of their time. Many members were college-educated and worked and lived independently prior to marriage. Delphine Anderson Squires did not follow her family when they moved to Seattle, but remained in Austin, Minnesota, where she taught music in the elementary school. Kansan Ruth Patterson Harvey attended a business college in Chicago, and met her husband while living in Mexico, where she owned and operated a school for girls. Dr. Roy Martin's wife, Nellie Colton, studied to be a concert pianist at the Chicago Conservatory of Music but diphtheria weakened her hands and throat. Belle Viley Park, Dr. William S. Park's wife, did not attend college, but she was a cultured "Southern Lady" and a talented horticulturalist.<sup>12</sup> Helen Stewart, born in Illinois and raised in California, attended college in California. Shortly after graduating, she married and moved with her husband to Nevada, settling in Las Vegas in 1881 when he acquired their ranch.<sup>13</sup> He was killed and died intestate when she was in her final stage of pregnancy, forcing Helen to remain on the ranch in order to protect her property rights. With help from her father, the Paiute Indians in the area, and other neighbors, the ranch was profitable, and she purchased more property, increasing the size of the ranch to almost two thousand acres. She ultimately sold a major portion of her property to William A Clark, who then subdivided it in anticipation of the arrival of the Union Pacific Railroad. When Helen remarried, she insisted her spouse sign a prenuptial

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<sup>12</sup> Isabelle Slavin Blackman, ed. "Biographies of Past Presidents of Mesquite, 1911-1967," MCR, box 23, folder 1.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas A Centennial History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 6-7.

agreement.<sup>14</sup> Helen retained a portion of the ranch for her home and family cemetery and became involved in the Mesquite Club and other aspects of Las Vegas society.

The Mesquite Club's persistent, underlying theme, the betterment of woman, suggested the desire to expand their world view. The organizational meeting stressed "advancement of all levels of general culture," concurrent with being "unlimited in work or purpose for advancing women" by developing "each one along the particular line of work which is her pleasure and at the same time admits of the broadest lines of thought and work for progressive women."<sup>15</sup> Club meetings followed the standard literary club format, beginning with a discussion of action items followed by presentation of an agreed-upon topic which ranged from international to local matters. Through research and discussion women gained confidence in public speaking and learned about all aspects of Nevada, the operations of municipal government, foreign cultures, and current events, recognition of women's accomplishments, and women's legal status in society.<sup>16</sup> Within one year, the Mesquite Club became affiliated with the Nevada network, the Nevada Federation of Women's Clubs (Nevada Federation) as well as the national GFWC.

The women operated from the maternalist conviction that public space was an extension of the home. As homemakers, wives, and mothers, they cared for the community welfare, were helpmates to their husbands, and nurtured the children. As community caretakers, they took charge of beautification, sanitation, and public health. As helpmates to their husbands, they supported campaigns to boost the Las Vegas economy. As mothers, they oversaw education and children's health and welfare. In

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<sup>14</sup> Cathy Luchetti and Carol Olwell, *Women of the West* (Berkeley: Antelope Island Press, 1982), 151.

<sup>15</sup> Meeting Minutes, 10 February 1911, box 10.

<sup>16</sup> MCR, box 2, folder 13.



performing these functions, they created important community networks, and transmitted middle-class values and standards. Through it all, they pursued full citizenship by lobbying to remove laws that restricted women's ownership and control of property, improved women's economic well being, and recognized women as independent citizens.

Locally, the Mesquite Club's first major undertaking was the project for which they are best known: planting shade trees throughout the town. Las Vegas in 1911 was a small town with a mere 937 residents. The railroad was the largest single employer, but Las Vegas was predominantly agricultural. Most streets were unpaved and sidewalks were practically non-existent. Pockets of development left little protection against windstorms and the searing desert sun. With no air conditioning or electric fans during summer, residents attempted to mitigate the extreme summer temperatures by closing doors and shuttering windows, but by mid-afternoon, the heat was unbearable. The Mesquite Club's initiative to plant trees throughout Las Vegas provided welcomed shade and was the first of many joint endeavors with the Chamber of Commerce and the Las Vegas political establishment.

After insisting that Mayor Buol declare an Arbor Day, the women engaged the Chamber of Commerce, school board, and local government officials. The ladies raised funds by selling tags for ten cents each, and recruited school children to assist in fundraising, tree planting, and watering. The Las Vegas Land and Water Company, operated by Walter Bracken, whose wife, Anna, joined the Mesquite Club, purchased and planted hundreds of trees surrounding employees' cottages. The city forester agreed to plant trees along non-residential streets or vacant lots. The women organized and directed

all committees. Local dignitaries participated in the planting ceremony, digging the first shovel of dirt.

The *Las Vegas Age*, the local newspaper owned by Delphine Squires and her husband, Charles, lauded the Las Vegas Land and Water Company and the politicians, but the especially praised the ladies, exclaiming, “Here’s to the ladies. God bless them! If it had not been for the determined efforts of the Mesquite Club members, the movement would long ago have died a natural death and Las Vegas would have remained the same sun-scorched child of the desert as her sister towns in Nevada.”<sup>17</sup> Thereafter, Mesquite clubwomen planted trees annually on Arbor Day, beautifying the courthouse, public buildings and the school grounds, and the men eventually incorporated beautification into public policy. In 1931, Dr. Roy Martin convinced the City Council to apply for federal aid to plant trees in city parks.<sup>18</sup>

By 1931, conservationism was a priority in the West and clubwomen were strong proponents. Clubwomen accepted conservation as part of women’s purview, claiming that women were responsible for preserving “God’s natural resources and American abundance” for the children.<sup>19</sup> Women participated prominently in bird protection, nature study, national park campaigns, and tree planting. The GFWC accounted for over half the membership of the National Parks Association by 1930, and their letter writing and publicity campaigns were invaluable in the National Park Service’s conservation efforts.

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<sup>17</sup> “Everybody Plants Trees Wednesday,” *Las Vegas Age*, 10 February 1912, 1; “Arbor Day Real Thing,” *Las Vegas Age*, 17 February 1912, 1.

<sup>18</sup> *Las Vegas Age*, 6 January 1931, 6.

<sup>19</sup> Glenda Riley, “Wimmin Is Everywhere”: Conserving and Feminizing Western Landscapes, 1870 to 1940,” *The Western Historical Quarterly* 29 (Spring 1998):10; also Sandra Jeanne Johnson. “Early Conservation by the Arizona Federation of Women’s Clubs 1900-1932.” (MS thesis, University of Arizona, 1993); Priscilla G Masima, “A Neglected Partnership General Federation of Women’s Clubs and Conservation, 1890-1920” (Ph.D. diss., University of Connecticut, 1997). These works examine how women perceived conservation as an extension of women’s purview, civic patriotism, and as a means of elevating women’s status.

In 1948, conservationist Bernard DeVoto praised the GFWC for providing “the strongest single opposition” to disturbing roads in Olympic National Park.<sup>20</sup> The Nevada Federation of Women’s Clubs “pledged to conserve Nevada’s natural resources and restore usable and historic sites”, because conservation was part of women’s purview.<sup>21</sup>

In Las Vegas, the Mesquite members encouraged citizens to plant lawns and foliage. Mrs. Belle Park used her horticultural expertise to advise residents about which shrubs and trees could best adapt to Las Vegas’ harsh climate, and led beautification projects. Clubwomen organized classes to teach children to appreciate and work the soil. The men realized that women’s work contributed to the city’s sustainability as evidenced when, after the Arbor Day tree planting, the *Las Vegas Age* declared, “And by the way, were it not for the ladies we would not give a whoop in Iceland whether we had any trees or not for we wouldn’t any of us have been here.”<sup>22</sup> Clubwomen passed conservation values to the next generation of women by supporting Campfire Girls, an organization that instilled conservation and leadership values to young girls.

Sanitation and beautification initiatives were part of the municipal housekeeping philosophy through which the GFWC and similar women’s organizations expanded into public improvements. The Mesquite Club listed city beautification as one of the club’s primary objectives at the organizational meeting.<sup>23</sup> At their March 7, 1913, meeting they resolved to meet with City Commissioners to discuss removal of garbage and debris and proceeded to convince local officials to clean up and beautify Las Vegas, establishing an

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<sup>20</sup> Stephen Fox, *The American Conservation Movement John Muir and His Legacy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1981), 342-343.

<sup>21</sup> Riley, 9-10.

<sup>22</sup> “Arbor Day Real Thing,”8.

<sup>23</sup> Organizational Meeting Minutes, 10 February 1911, MCR, box 2, folder 13.

annual Cleanup Day.<sup>24</sup> In the early years, they targeted clean up of debris and waste left by the railroads and the cleaning of alleys and vacant lots. Public officials eventually absorbed some initiatives into public policy. The sheriff assigned the chain gang with the task of cleaning vacant lots and debris, and City Commissioners pressured the railroads to remove discarded oil cans and waste from alleys and vacant lots.<sup>25</sup> In the 1930s the women brought attention to poor sanitary conditions in jails and the auto courts that housed tourist and transient workers.

The women's club culture was at its zenith during the era of Las Vegas' initial development, and men understood the value of club work. Many men bragged about their wives' club membership.<sup>26</sup> Early in California club history, the men recognized the civic and economic benefits when the first, club-sponsored flower market not only paid for itself, but funded and maintained a public playground. In 1906, California clubwoman, Dorothea Moore, admitted that clubwomen enjoyed cooperation from the male population, "The west is an easy field—the men are willing partners and have always been generous and kindly advisors and aids,"<sup>27</sup> signifying a collaboration between the sexes.

The Mesquite women partnered with the men in commercial endeavors directed toward boosting Las Vegas. Melva Beckley operated the family store with her husband, Will. Helen Stewart gave the men pomegranates and other produce from her ranch to help them promote Las Vegas as an agricultural center at a world's fair in San Francisco.

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<sup>24</sup>Meeting Minutes, MCR, box 2, folder 13.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., Although public records and newspapers omitted women's part in affecting these policies, in 1911 the Mesquite Club minutes indicated that women initiated clean up action.

<sup>26</sup> Blair, 114.

<sup>27</sup> Dorothea Moore, "The Work of Women's Clubs in California," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 28 (September 1906): 62.

In 1918, the ladies staged a production of “the Mikado,” raising funds to improve Las Vegas roads in anticipation of the developing automobile tourism. The following year, they assisted in the Chamber of Commerce’s efforts to establish Las Vegas as a rest stop by creating a lunchroom on the screened porch of the Chamber building and serving meals to hungry motorists.<sup>28</sup> Like many businessmen of the West, Las Vegas men knew that the women’s work enhanced commerce and relied on the ladies to support campaigns that marketed Las Vegas as a desirable place to live and visit. The Mesquite women remained active in their support of community and policy issues through the Cold War years. In 1952, when Western Airlines was the sole air carrier with approved routes between Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the Mesquite Club understood the economic benefits of tourism, and at the request of clubwoman and Chamber of Commerce president, Bertha Ronzone, submitted a formal petition to the federal civil aeronautics board requesting authorization for at two more airlines to serve the Las Vegas market and asked that the hearing be held in Las Vegas.<sup>29</sup>

As citizens, the Mesquite women were proud patriots. After a joint meeting with the Chamber of Commerce, they marched with their husbands in the “Preparedness Day Parade” demonstrating their support for World War I because “Uncle Sam needs obedient servants.”<sup>30</sup> Members supported the war effort through work with the Red Cross, sewing socks for soldiers and sending aid to children in France and Belgium. When the federal Food Administration called upon citizens to conserve food for the war effort, Delphine Squires declared, “It was up to women’s organizations to take charge”<sup>31</sup> as she oversaw

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<sup>28</sup> Blackman, “Biographies of Past Presidents,” MCR, box 23, folder 1.

<sup>29</sup> Meeting Minutes, 7 February 1952, MCR, box 2, folder 17.

<sup>30</sup> Meeting Minutes, 12 January 1917, MCR, box 2, folder 13.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 1 March 1918.

the conservation effort. During World War II, the Mesquite Club loyally obeyed Congressional directives by opening each meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance and placing their hand over their heart. Delphine Squires chaired the Americanization Committee and the Gas Rations Board. The club donated funds to plant a lawn at the women's USO building, and served as USO hostesses. They went door-to-door selling Liberty Bonds and learned home nursing skills from the Red Cross. Margaret Allen worked as a Red Cross Gray Lady, comforting hospitalized war veterans. Their engagement in wartime work was one expression of responsible citizenship, but not the most important. The women believed that democracy was best defended through education.

When Sheriff Corkhill's wife, Mary, presided over the club, she adopted the quotation, "Education is a better safeguard of liberty than a standing army," which articulated one of the most important tenets of citizenship to which the membership adhered.<sup>32</sup> As citizens and mothers, Mesquite women, like clubwomen across the nation, paid close attention to education. The Mesquite Club developed an ongoing relationship with school leaders, and many were active in the Parent Teachers Association (PTA). During Las Vegas' early years, they improved the school environment by planting trees in the school yard, funding playground equipment, and assisting with school social functions. They raised money for construction of a school playground and monitored project costs. In 1915, they successfully lobbied the county and school board to establish a kindergarten. By 1928, they claimed educator and school superintendent, Maude Frazier, as a member. In 1935, the Mesquite Club held a letter-writing campaign to the State Legislature in support of an increase in the sales tax to supplement school funding.

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<sup>32</sup> Blackman, "Biographies of Past Presidents," MCR, box 23.

They performed musicales and held receptions to raise funds for the boy's basketball team and to fund scholarships. In addition to creating a pleasant school environment and encouraging financing of education, these mothers and guardians of citizenship and Americanism, were deeply concerned that school curricula and methods of teaching sustained citizenship and middle-class values.<sup>33</sup> Their involvement continued through the Cold War years, as they employed maternalist politics to ensure that the American ethic of faith in institutions of democracy, self-reliance, personal responsibility, and free market was transmitted through public education. The national federation was instrumental in making American History a requirement in high school and college curricula and in sponsoring high school essay contests in which students wrote about patriotic topics such as, "What America Means to Me."<sup>34</sup>

Mesquite Club records indicate an ongoing oversight of Las Vegas' public education. Educators frequently spoke at club meetings, often discussing the relationship between education and women and family. Women's involvement in schools was a discussion items at the District 2 Reciprocity Day convention in 1922. Concerned with the changing values and attitudes of the Twenties, the Mesquite Club met with Las Vegas teachers to discuss and oversee teaching methods and movements in education. In 1939, Maude Frazier requested support to add new extra-curricular activities in schools, pointing out that in the changing Las Vegas culture families were becoming less functional, forcing the schools to step in where homes were failing.<sup>35</sup> The mothers of

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<sup>33</sup> Kristin Kate White, "Training a Nation: The General Federation of Women's Clubs' Rhetorical Education and American Citizenship, 1890-1930" (Ph.D. diss., Ohio State University, 2010). White demonstrates women's clubs influence in pedagogical tools as a means of promoting American citizenship.

<sup>34</sup> Paige Meltzer, "'The Pulse and Conscience of America': The General Federation and Women's Citizenship, 1945-1960," *Frontier: A Journal of Women Studies* 30, (September 2009): 56.

<sup>35</sup> Meeting Minutes, 5 December 1922, MCR, box 1 folder 16; Meeting Minutes 13 January 1939, MCR, box 2, folder 17. These minutes reflect Reciprocity Day and Maude Frazier's concerns.

future citizens, Mesquite clubwomen participated in all aspects of schooling, from creating a pleasing learning environment, to promoting values and physical well being of the students, and finally to overseeing pedagogical methods, all in the name of motherhood and Americanism. They also provided scholarships for worthy students.

In conjunction with the Nevada Federation, clubwomen created a Student Loan Fund in 1917. Initially established to help young girls “acquire enough education to become self supporting” and less economically dependent on men, it eventually was open to any student, male or female, who qualified. Applicants needed recommendations from their last teacher and two clubwomen, verifying need, worth, and character in order to qualify. The program continued through the Sixties, but on a smaller scale. In 1962, they assisted a young art student applying for college by helping him purchase appropriate clothing.<sup>36</sup> The scholarship fund was a GFWC staple, and another means of encouraging educated citizens.

Next to schools, they perceived libraries as an important means of inculcating youth with values of citizenship and history. The Mesquite Club, like clubwomen throughout the GFWC, devoted a large part of their energies to creating libraries in Las Vegas. Almost immediately, the Nevada Society of Historical Research asked the Mesquite to store historical documents in the library, and the clubwomen established archives that housed documents and artifacts of Las Vegas history. Clubwomen often decided which documents bore historical significance. In 1913, in partnership with the Nevada Federation, they petitioned their local assemblymen to pass legislation providing for traveling libraries and in 1923, they lobbied for funds to create libraries in rural communities.

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<sup>36</sup> MCR, box 1, folder 40.



From its inception, the GFWC's mission was to function as a "body of social workers who should make better conditions on every hand." The state of family and children was a continuing club concern. In 1921, concurrent with the Women's Joint Congressional Committee's lobby for the Sheppard-Towner Act, the GFWC established a Department of Welfare that encompassed child welfare and social hygiene.<sup>37</sup>

Clubwomen in Las Vegas addressed child welfare and related public health care early in its history. In 1913 they created an Emergency Committee to assist families in need. The women sponsored programs teaching proper child care and nutrition, and held a "Baby Week," offering prizes for the healthiest babies. They recruited nurses to hold classes demonstrating correct methods of bathing and child care and educating mothers about nutrition. They used the power of the radio to garner support for child welfare and to deliver campaigns promoting public health such as alerting mothers to dangers of scarlet fever, identifying the symptoms, and urging them to seek immediate medical treatment. The women's assertion that "how women's clubs affect the community is a challenge to the women, not the men,"<sup>38</sup> signifies their conviction that they performed a necessary and valuable function as citizens.

During the Depression, they aided starving women and children and helped shape local welfare policy. On the surface, the Depression did not appear to affect Las Vegas as acutely as the rest of America. The Boulder Dam Project presented job opportunities that attracted men from around the country. According to Nora Ullom, Las Vegas in 1931

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<sup>37</sup> Lucetta C. Chase, "The Social Program of the General Federation of Women's Clubs: One Index of Fifty Years of Progress," *Journal of Social Forces* 1 (May 1923): 466-467.

<sup>38</sup> "Fifty Years of Progress," *Journal of Social Forces* 1 (May 1923): 466-467.

<sup>38</sup> Meeting Minutes, 21 October 1938, MCR, box 2, folder 17.

“felt the Depression very little,” and was a town of “swinging change and prosperity.”<sup>39</sup> Ellen M. Albright testified that when she arrived in Las Vegas in 1935, the hordes of men seeking work was so great that the bus driver cautioned the women to stay off the streets. Vera Speers Sutton, also affirmed the carnival-like atmosphere that pervaded Las Vegas. She expected that with a population of about four thousand, she would find a small, quiet village. What she observed when she arrived in 1935 was a somewhat frightening scenario:

On our first venture along Fremont Street, I was sure there must be a rather rowdy convention in town...The street was ablaze with unusual signs and bright, hot lights... people thronged the street, milling aimlessly about. Boisterous laughter, the loud blaring of the trumpets or saxophone, and the heavy pounding beat of pianos along with the tinkling of glass from the many saloons along First Street filled the air in a raucous and discordant symphony. Automobile traffic was at a standstill, as customers propelled their way through the swinging doors of one saloon to another. The main gambling casino resembled a large barn. Grey smoke hung like a veil...slot machines clanged steadily away.<sup>40</sup>

The local business community and real estate developers did not seem to look beyond the profits amassed from the population and tourism boom.

The raucous, prosperous facade belied the unemployment, destitution, and starvation many families were enduring. The Dam project did offer jobs, but applicants far exceeded the opportunities, which were mostly temporary. The twenty-five to fifty men who herded into Southern Nevada each day obtained no more than a few days' work. Las Vegas merchants ceased extending credit, referring customers to the banks. In 1931, local government entities sponsored breadlines for those in need, but the Salvation Army discovered that women and children were starving. The Mesquite Club immediately partnered with the Salvation Army to help remedy the problem. First, the

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<sup>39</sup>Blackman, “Biographies of Past Presidents,” MCR, box 23.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid.

*Las Vegas Age*, operated by Mr. and Mrs. Squires, reported the incident and demanded an investigation into the public breadlines. The investigation revealed that many able-bodied men were taking advantage of the assistance. As a remedy, breadlines were discontinued and replaced with a committee of civic organizations, including women's groups, empowered to oversee relief efforts.<sup>41</sup> Along with the Salvation Army, clubwomen gathered food and clothing, and contributed to a milk fund to help the needy. Mrs. William S. Park, collected donations through her work in the Red Cross. The ladies, working through the committee, insisted that women and children be fed first and employers give married men priority in hiring. By 1939, the Mesquite Club allocated regular subsidies to the PTA milk fund and hot lunch program and urged other community organizations to follow suit.<sup>42</sup>

As social reform gave way to institutional bureaucracies, clubwomen adopted new strategies. They monitored the State Legislature, tracking legislation that affected their concerns. By sitting on advisory boards like the Child Welfare Council, they continued to influence social issues and to campaign for legislation for improved child welfare. In 1941, they lobbied the state to take advantage of Title IV of the Social Security Act and to request federal grants to assist dependent children. They crafted legislation for stricter adoption laws that including investigating applicant homes provided a proper setting for adoption, ensuring the child was a proper subject for adoption, and requiring a six-month trial residence in the adoptive home before final approval of the adoption.<sup>43</sup> In post-war Las Vegas, the Mesquite Club became less

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<sup>41</sup>"A Pitiful and Pathetic Sight," *Las Vegas Age*, 10 February 1931; "'Bread Line' is Discontinued," *Las Vegas Age*, 12 February 1931, 1.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid.

<sup>43</sup>Meeting Minutes, 7 February 1941, MCR, box 2, folder 17.

activist and more philanthropic. They worked closely with courts to provide financial aid to youth caught in the cracks of the state's welfare system. They assisted a young, high-school girl in foster care who aged out of the public welfare system by providing financial assistance until she graduated from high school.<sup>44</sup> They donated money to the Home of the Good Shepherd so that the facility would remain open until the State approved funding. In 1965, they housed the Operation Independence office, Lubertha Johnson's program to assist the African American population. The Mesquite Club also organized a Woman's Council to provide recreation and social services for the elderly.

Politically, they supported legislation to increase funding for handicapped children and day nurseries. They addressed women's health by conducting an awareness campaign for prevention of uterine cancer. They advocated use of seat belts in the name of public safety. Their commitment to public service continued, but in a more supportive role than in the club's early years.

The club campaigned unceasingly for legal equality for women throughout its existence. In the early years, the club's programs focused on current events, local government, tax structures, and developing their public persona, skills that would help them in addressing public officials. They realized that economic independence was crucial to elevating women's status, so from 1913 they embarked on a thirty-year campaign to change legislation that subordinated married women. In union with the Nevada Federation, they petitioned the Nevada legislature to revise divorce laws that restricted property rights of married women. In 1917, they supported an eight-hour work day for women. In 1934, they established a committee on property rights for women and crafted legislation providing for women to inherit community property and lobbied for

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<sup>44</sup>MCR, box 2, folder 15.

passage in 1935, with Mrs. Harley Harmon traveling to northern Nevada to secure votes. The bill was defeated in 1935, but in 1939 Nevada Assemblywoman Louella K. Drum reintroduced the legislation, and it passed.<sup>45</sup> Their work to ensure equality in division of community property continued well into the Fifties.

Mesquite women demonstrated that they were responsible citizens and community members. Clubwomen Helen Stewart and Mrs. W.B. Mundy were among the first women to serve on a jury in 1916. Their performance prompted the *Las Vegas Age* to admit that the women not only proved that they were “fully as competent as men,” they willingly fulfilled their civic duty.<sup>46</sup> Delphine Squires chaired the first Library Board which she also helped to establish. Helen Stewart was the first woman to serve on the School Board, and after suffrage, the Mesquite Club made it a priority to encourage clubwomen to vote. In 1920, Delphine Squires’ daughter and clubwoman, Florence Doherty, was the first woman elected as County Clerk.

In the 1930s club membership shifted slightly from women who were solely occupied as full-time homemakers to those who pursued professional careers and entrepreneurial endeavors. Vivian Woods was a publicist in Hollywood before moving to Las Vegas. Margaret McGuire Taney continued her professional career with the Nevada State Welfare in the Old Age Assistance Program. Isabelle Slavin Blackman, a teacher, relocated to Las Vegas to work with her friend, school superintendent Maude Frazier. The women actively supported local charities in the community with modest, but regular donations. When they constructed a new clubhouse in 1933 after four years of collecting and saving money, the *Las Vegas Age* praised the facility as a center of “social

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<sup>45</sup> Meeting Minutes, 10 February 1939, MCR, box 2, folder 18.

<sup>46</sup> “Women Perform Jury Service,” *Las Vegas Age*, 12 February 1916, 1.

and intellectual culture” in Las Vegas and acknowledged the women’s contributions in building the Las Vegas community , stating that the women “helped to form public opinion in much the same way that the Chamber of Commerce has done. In fact it has sometimes been the leader in movements which the Chamber later has helped carry out,”<sup>47</sup> a testament to the women’s leadership in building community and establishing society.

From its inception through the end of the 1960s, the Mesquite Club members strongly believed that that as women, their talents and skills as homemakers and mothers were important elements of citizenship, worthy of political and economic equality. The GFWC endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment in 1944 to convince President Truman to appoint women to leadership positions in his administration, and when post-war America urged women to return to the domestic sphere, they praised women’s work as mothers and homemakers as a key weapon needed to win the Cold War. The Mesquite Club records do not indicate whether the women came out in support of ERA, but they agreed with the GFWC’s conviction that regardless of marital or work status, all women were fundamentally wives and mothers within their community.<sup>48</sup>

The Mesquite Club continued its maternalist position during the Cold War. In her 1947 address to the club, newly-elected president, Mrs. R.A. Wickam, stated that in order to obtain peace for the children, American women needed to move from the “little home cell” to see the world as her home, place housekeeping on a world scale, and be good home citizens.<sup>49</sup> In 1949, Mrs. Earl B. Shoesmith, GFCW Recording Secretary, stated

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<sup>47</sup> “A Monument to Progress,” *Las Vegas Age*, 29 April 1933.

<sup>48</sup> Paige Meltzer, “The Pulse and Conscience of America,” 57-58, 70.

<sup>49</sup> MCR, box 2, folder 16.

that women working together as women became “stronger and greater,” and emphasized her opinion by explaining the phases through which clubwomen advanced:

the self cultural improvement stage, through which women came together for mutual cultural improvement after the Civil War; the philanthropic stage in which members devoted their time and energies to helping one another; the public welfare era, in which they began to participate in community improvement projects; the legislative period, still existent and needing further development to provide better law making; and the participation in international relations, another present phase.<sup>50</sup>

Women became involved in Korean relief work and began a correspondence program with women in Korea. They did not take action on a 1952 request from the GFWC to participate in an effort to recruit women into the armed services.

Mesquite clubwomen worked in partnership with the men in Las Vegas and believed that they were partners in citizenship as well. They helped to build community, using their influence to establish beautification projects, improve sanitation, establish education standards, and fund child and welfare care. In their mission to elevate the status of womanhood, they lobbied for laws ensuring equal citizenship and property rights for women.

They supported suffrage as an extension of feminine ideals and opposed radical feminists such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman who criticized the established gender paradigm. Mesquite records indicate reveal conflict surrounding Gilman’s scheduled speech in Las Vegas. Suffragist Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s essays frequently attacked the established institutions: government, religion, gender roles, motherhood, law, education, sports, and entertainment.<sup>51</sup> Undoubtedly, Gilman’s radicalism accounted for

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<sup>50</sup> “Mesquite Club Told of Need For Work in Groups to Increase Importance in Life,” *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 14 May 1949 .

<sup>51</sup> Judith Nies, *Nine Women: Portraits from the American Radical Tradition* (University of California Press, 2002), 142.

the friction that occurred within the Mesquite Club over sponsoring Gilman to lecture on “the suffrage question.”<sup>52</sup> They sold tickets and arranged for accommodations at the school, but shortly before the scheduled event, Delphine Squires, then club president, instructed the women to cancel the lecture, and refund any sales. The women complied, but at least five members expressed plans to travel to Goldfield to hear Gilman speak.

The clubwomen’s quest to advance womanhood did not include a rejection of marriage but centered on women’s traditional role as mother, nurturer, and helpmate to the men. An early tribute to the Mesquite Club acknowledged: “The Ladies built the libraries/And fostered public schools/They beautified the roadways/And constructed public pools”<sup>53</sup> demonstrates that Las Vegas’ men recognized the women as the “builders of Las Vegas” and the group who set the society standards. The clubwomen held to the standard of maternalism through the Cold War years, even while pursuing legislation that would provide them with equal rights as citizens. Marilyn Staggs, who was president during the Cold War years, articulated their perception of women’s purpose and role as citizens, by affirming, “I feel that it is a real privilege to be a WOMAN. [sic] As a woman we have to play a very important role in life, one of love, tenderness, and understanding; but also one of strength, fortitude, and as a backup for our men...if we do it well, we cannot usurp the place of leadership of our men.”<sup>54</sup> While clubwomen matured over time, they did not waiver from their conviction through their role as homemakers and mothers they were worthy of full citizenship in order to safeguard the home, democracy, and protect Americanism.

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<sup>52</sup> Meeting Minutes, 15 September 1912, MCR, box 2, folder 1.

<sup>53</sup> Tom Taney, “The Ladies of Mesquite,” Undated, MCR, box 23.

<sup>54</sup> Blackman, “Biographies of Past Presidents,” MCR, box 23, folder 1.



## Chapter 3

### The Service League of Las Vegas: The Conscience of the Community

One winter's evening in February 1946 at the Fortnighter's Bridge club, Florence Lee Jones Cahlan and seven of her closest friends were discussing the critical need to help Las Vegas' less fortunate citizens. By the end of the evening, they agreed to create the Service League. They invited seventeen women from their social circle who they believed would be committed to community service. All accepted, and by the end of the , the Service League held its first meeting. Each of the women, who represented Las Vegas' most influential citizens, was a seasoned community volunteer and uncomfortably aware of the glaring needs for social welfare services.

The end of World War II, while a joyous occasion, signaled the return of veterans, the closure of the Basic Magnesium Plant, and a falling off of support from agencies that assisted the military and needy families during the war. Additionally, an appalling lack of public assistance was allocated for mothers, children, the elderly, or the infirmed.<sup>1</sup> Florence Lee Jones-Cahlan and her friends had a long record of volunteer service. Before and especially during World War II, they volunteered for the Red Cross, Community Chest, USO, Travelers Aid, PTA, church auxiliaries, and other civic groups in Las Vegas. They now received a barrage of requests for help from public and private agencies desperate to fill the void created by unsympathetic state legislators and local officials who refused to fund welfare services adequately. Consequently, it was inevitable that Jones-Cahlan and her seven friends started the Service League. In this

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<sup>1</sup> Florence and John Cahlan Collection, box 16, folder 1, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas. (hereinafter cited as FJC).

chapter, I will demonstrate how the Service League, functioning as citizens of privilege in Las Vegas, became an unofficial and unpaid extension of public health and welfare services, provided financial assistance for designated causes, and passed on their civic values to the next generation of young women.

It is not surprising that Florence Lee Jones-Cahlan led this effort. From the moment she arrived in Las Vegas, she was active in the Las Vegas community. Born in Missouri in 1910, she graduated from the University of Missouri in 1933 after spending her adolescent years in the jungles of Sumatra with her family. Shortly after earning her degree in journalism, Jones-Cahlan moved to Las Vegas to be with her family who were residents at the time. The *Las Vegas Review Journal* hired her, the only woman reporter on their staff at the time. It was here that she met her future husband, Al Cahlan.

Jones-Cahlan's first assignment was a lawsuit involving the Hoover Dam project. Through her coverage of this story, she forged friendships with Dam administrators who allowed her to be the first woman and only reporter granted access inside the dam. Subsequently, she was tasked with covering city and county government. The knowledge she gained as a reporter, combined with her sense of community, fueled her activism, and she soon melded career with civic engagement.

She belonged to the Mesquite Club and was active in other social welfare endeavors typically associated with women such as the Home of the Good Shepherd for at-risk girls, the National Foundation of Infantile Paralysis, and the Association of the Blind. She was equally involved in developing tourism and commerce. In 1937 she was instrumental in creating a ski recreation area in what was then called, Kyle Canyon. She belonged to the Chamber of Commerce and was the first woman invited to join the male-

only Jaycees organization. She responded by immediately recruiting twenty other women. Unfortunately, the national by-laws prohibited women from membership, so the Las Vegas Jaycees circumvented the rule by listing female members by first initial and last name. The ruse was discovered and a multi-year battle to retain the women was defeated in 1944.<sup>2</sup> Despite the exclusion, Jones-Cahlan did not consider her sex a hindrance and once commented, “I was always treated with the highest respect because I behaved like a lady.”<sup>3</sup> Her sister-in-law described her as a true “Grand Dame” who “never questioned her role as wife, daughter, sister, friend, confidante or professional” in her eulogy tribute to Jones-Cahlan.<sup>4</sup> Jones-Cahlan’s leadership skills, desire to help build the Las Vegas community, and commitment to excellence led her to found the Service League.

From its inception, the Service League replicated the national Junior Assistance League (Junior League). Founded in 1901 as the “Junior League for the Promotion of Settlement Movements,” by railroad tycoon, E.H. Harriman’s daughter, Mary, it was a collection of New York City debutantes who did not want to be “indifferent citizens.” The ladies felt a responsibility to help those less fortunate, and planned projects and raised funds to aid New York’s poor and immigrant population.<sup>5</sup> The early Twentieth Century an overall growth of charitable and philanthropic organizations occurred. Industrialists as well as middle and professional classes of men and women formed philanthropic organizations to assist the poor such as the men’s Lions and Rotary Clubs, and women’s Altrusa organization. E. H. Harriman organized the first Boy Scouts

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<sup>2</sup>“Jones Told Vegas’ Story,” *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 30 September 1984, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> FJC, box 1.

<sup>5</sup> Barry M Franklin, “Women’s voluntarism, special education, and the Junior League: ‘social motherhood’ in Atlanta, 1916-1968,” *History of Education*, 29 (2000): 415.

Council in New York City and counseled his children on the obligations of the privileged to help those less fortunate. Mary Harriman took this advice to heart, becoming involved in the settlement house movement, and then starting The Junior League. It was an exclusive organization whose members, typically connected through family and sorority relationships, were recruited by invitation. The women wore the latest and most expensive fashions, which they wore to the gala balls and social events which they held on behalf of their causes.

The organization's social status and associations with the "right" people, inspired women of the privileged classes in other cities to create their own Junior League clubs. To maintain its exclusivity, the Junior League of New York City instituted the Association of Junior League,<sup>6</sup> requiring a stringent application and approval process for affiliation. (The Las Vegas Service League applied for affiliation with the Junior League annually from 1958 until its acceptance in 1970.) At least one detractor of the Junior League criticized the women's noblesse oblige patronage as an upper social stratum which they did not wish to disturb because from their privileged position, they determined which individuals were worthy of their assistance.<sup>7</sup> In 1938, contemporary author and poet, Struthers Burt, accused Philadelphia Leaguers of being smug and self-indulgent for proceeding with their annual bridge tournament on the same day Philadelphia was recognized for having the worst slums in the world. In the late Forties, author Cleveland Amory pontificated that Junior Leaguers were more concerned with fashionable charitable events than with the charities themselves. Casting them in the role of "Lady Bountiful" other critics asserted that rather than working to close the social

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<sup>6</sup> Ellen Kingman Fisher, *Junior League of Denver* (Colorado Historical Society: 1993), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Franklin, 427.

distance between themselves and the lower classes, the women cared about strengthening and protecting their class identity and furthering their families' fortune. Elise Chenier claimed that being identified as a Junior Leaguer both conferred and confirmed status.<sup>8</sup> Their philanthropic work signified members as belonging to a higher class that possessed both surplus income and leisure time.<sup>9</sup>

In Las Vegas, the Service League copied the Junior League in form, function, and exclusivity. Headed by a Board of Managers, it was a small, closed organization, with membership by invitation only. The first meeting, held on February 26, 1946, revealed both elitism and classism. The by-laws limited membership to “young women who are well established, known mutually by other members to be of compatible disposition with civic interests, willingness to devote time and energy unselfishly to the betterment of underprivileged groups, primarily children, within Las Vegas, and of cultural background and good character.”<sup>10</sup> They sought young women, under the age of forty, who were not gainfully employed, with sufficient time to devote to the League's projects, and whom they believed suitable for their group. While not the only women's voluntary organization requiring sponsorship or invitation, the Service League was the most exclusive. One Las Vegas woman referred to the Service League as part of the “Foundation 400,” a comparison to Mary Astor's designation of the elite inner circle of New York City society.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Franklin, 427; Elise Chenier, “Class, Gender, and the Social Standard: The Montreal Junior League, 1920-1939,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 9 (2009): 676-7, 687. These works describe the women of the Junior League as an elitist class.

<sup>9</sup> Eileen Kingman Fisher, *Junior League of Denver* (Colorado: Colorado Historical Society, 1993), 6.

<sup>10</sup> SL, box 1.

<sup>11</sup> Mildred Bardy with Deborah Baker Grant, *Mildred Bardy Oral History*, Las Vegas, NV, 11 March 1981, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas. For further information about Mary Astor's Foundation 400 visit *History and Genealogy of the Wealthy*

Like the Junior League, the women in the Service League belonged to some Las Vegas' most affluent and prominent families. Loretta Isabel Newton Gubler, a wealthy young woman from Beverly Hills, California, moved to Las Vegas with her attorney husband, was known for her flaming red hair, fox furs, and "inevitable" hat.<sup>12</sup> Tona Cashman Margisin sent her pre-adolescent sons to a private boarding school in Switzerland. The League's newsletters are filled with reports of exotic family vacations abroad and post-graduate European trips for children. Leaguer Margy Purdue-Johnson commented that in the early 1960s, when she arrived in Las Vegas during the summer as a newlywed, she was concerned that there were no women who were her age. Her worries were put to rest when she learned that the families were vacationing for the summer and would return in the fall.<sup>13</sup>

The Service League's mission was community service. Unlike the Mesquite Club, they did not express theories about their civic or political responsibilities as women citizens, but since many Service League members also belonged to the Mesquite Club, it can be concluded that to some degree ideals of maternalism occupied their consciousness. Service League records provided some evidence that they valued homemaking and motherhood through positive references to women happily caring for home and family.<sup>14</sup> They also perceived their responsibilities as complementary to the men. Their marriages were partnerships in which women contributed to their husbands' business success by maintaining friendships and networks with influential associates; being attractive,

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*Families of America*. [http://www.raken.com/American\\_wealth/OTHER/newsletter/chronicle/111103.asp](http://www.raken.com/American_wealth/OTHER/newsletter/chronicle/111103.asp), accessed 10 March 2012.

<sup>12</sup> *Commemorative Biographies Celebrating The Junior League of Las Vegas, Tenth Anniversary* (The Junior League of Las Vegas, May 1982), Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

<sup>13</sup> Margy Purdue-Johnson, interview by author, Las Vegas, Nevada, 31 March 2011.

<sup>14</sup> "President's Pen," *Sage Newsletter*, "SL, box 4.

sociable hostesses and companions, and by being active in the community.<sup>15</sup>

Associations and friendships made through the Service League helped seal important business and social networks.

Stressing betterment of social, economic, and educational conditions in the local community, new members served a provisional period of one year where they were “trained by lay and professional community leaders in the study of the city’s welfare, educational, and cultural facilities, as well as a view of the League’s far-reaching community activities...Secondly, each member must put her special aptitudes to practical use in the various cultural and welfare organizations...learn to give efficient volunteer aid to the community in the capacity for which she is best suited.”<sup>16</sup> This concept resembles the early Mesquite Club references to women working in areas for which they were best suited as previously noted. Provisional members had to devote a minimum of one hundred hours of community service during the year if they were married with school-age children or fifty hours if they had full-time jobs or small children at home.<sup>17</sup> Members recorded hours devoted to community service. The first president’s report indicates that the thirty-seven League members logged 3,249 hours of community work.<sup>18</sup>

In 1947, post-war Las Vegas, the Service League assumed the responsibility of caring for the community’s needy population to fill the void of Las Vegas’ “unmet needs.”<sup>19</sup> Las Vegas was a small town with approximately 60,000 residents but the need

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<sup>15</sup> Fisher, 27. For evidence of upper class women’s understandings of marriage and their appropriate roles in marriage, see Carol Slater, “Class Differences in Definition of Role and Membership in Voluntary Associations Among Urban Married Women.” *The American Journal of Sociology* 65 (May, 1960): 616-619.

<sup>16</sup> SL, box 1, box 4.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Margy-Purdue Johnson interview with author disclosed that while the Service League preferred members who did not work, there were exceptions.

<sup>19</sup> FJC, box 16.

in Las Vegas was great. Returning veterans were returning home, and unemployed was increasing. Charities that assisted the military and their families during the War were winding down. The County hospital was bulging with indigent patients, and the county welfare facility could not meet the needs of its elderly residents. Polio and rheumatic fever left many children bedridden. The Service League's survey of local social service agencies and schools revealed an overwhelming need for welfare services among all the population. In many ways the city was booming and expanding as a tourist destination, but the poor, mostly the African American population on the city's West Side, were severely neglected. According to the 1950 census, African Americans comprised less than ten percent of the population but received 40% of Red Cross funds and 44% of public assistance.<sup>20</sup>

Welfare posed, perhaps the most urgent and heart-rending need. State pensions for widows and mothers with children were a mere pittance, and Nevada legislators refused to apply for federal Social Security Act funds to aid dependent children. State funding for old age assistance, child welfare and blind pensions were equally appalling. Nevada had only one orphanage in Carson City in which infants and adolescents were thrown together and adoptions were rare. Children with hearing, vision, and developmental disabilities were labeled "feebleminded" and housed in the adult state mental hospital or sent out of state for services. The boys' correctional school was overcrowded and understaffed. Despite the need, state and local politicians refused to fund these services. In 1955, one Nevada State Legislator adamantly voiced his opposition to public assistance, stating, "A person who can't stand on his own two feet

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<sup>20</sup> Percy Bruce Kaufman, "The Best City of Them All: A History of Las Vegas, 1930-1960." (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 1974), 378.



has no right to live. Children? If they haven't got parents able to bring them up, they're out of luck. Charity only breeds weaklings.”<sup>21</sup> Fortunately, the Service League accepted responsibility for assisting the “weaklings.”

Adhering to their policy to “investigate and then act,” they identified a range of needs demanding their attention and established six standing committees which they believed would best serve the community: the American Red Cross, Clark County Health Department, Parent Teachers Association, Nevada State Department of Welfare, Fund Drives, and Aid to Individuals. Working for the state and county as unpaid clerical and professional labor, they provided invaluable service to public agencies. They assisted health department by updating and organizing the backlog of important public health records, recording immunizations for smallpox, diphtheria, and tuberculosis, and helping public health nurses administer hearing and tuberculosis screening tests in the schools.

Comporting with the priorities of the national Junior League, the Service League devoted the bulk of its energy to children's needs. From its inception, the Junior League focused its attention on the education and care of disabled children. Prior to the passage of federal law in 1975 mandating public education for all children regardless of handicaps, many disabled children were excluded from the public school system and either remained at home or were institutionalized, generally out of town or out of state, in facilities that were not equipped to adequately serve their special needs. The Service League assisted physically and developmentally disabled children by creating and staffing a nursery school for handicapped children and, after they were trained by teachers, assisted in home schooling the children. Children bedridden from rheumatic fever and polio also received in-home tutoring and care. This support gave respite to

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 470.

mothers and, if not preventing, at least delaying removal of handicapped children from their families. Occasionally, a League woman became personally involved in the children's lives as in the case of one Leaguer who "adopted" a young girl stricken with polio, accompanying her through lengthy hospital stays in California, and following her through employment and marriage, until polio finally claimed the young woman's life.<sup>22</sup> The Service League raised funds for the Variety School for physically and mentally handicapped children. The women also served as room mothers and organized and participated in fundraisers for the PTA to support hot lunch programs and school initiatives.<sup>23</sup>

One of the most specialized forms of unpaid labor and child advocacy efforts occurred in the area of child welfare investigation. State officials trained League women in welfare theory and investigative techniques before releasing them to monitor foster care. Service League member, Thalia Dondero, explained that her investigation of one foster home uncovered a Dickensian theft ring in which the foster parents forced the children to steal.<sup>24</sup> These children were exploited, but juvenile delinquency was becoming a serious problem in Las Vegas in the 1950s and early 1960s. In 1961, juvenile delinquency in Las Vegas was twice the national average.<sup>25</sup> Then, as now, Nevada was one of the lowest ranking states to allocate funding for social services. The Service League attempted to mitigate juvenile delinquency by organizing a program in which prominent men in the community supervised and mentored young boys who were

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<sup>22</sup> Florence Lee Jones Cahlan and Marjory Phillips, "History of Service League, Chapter One," FJC, box 16, folder 7.

<sup>23</sup> Annual Reports, May 1946-May 1952, SL, box 1.

<sup>24</sup> Thalia Dondero, interview by author, Las Vegas, Nevada, 14 April 2011.

<sup>25</sup> Kaufman, 465.

referred by the juvenile court.<sup>26</sup> The women also visited the home for delinquent girls in Caliente, Nevada and became concerned that “at-risk” girls were integrated with and influenced by delinquents. Frances McNamee Moore helped found the Home of the Good Shepherd as a haven for those young girls who were not delinquent, but could not live at home, and added it to the list of League charities.<sup>27</sup>

While they dedicated a substantial amount of time and effort assisting individuals, the League’s primary vision and source of pride was their leadership in developing major community projects. Nothing exceeded the realm of possibility. Margy Purdue-Johnson recalled, “What I liked best about the League was that nothing was too big for us to tackle.”<sup>28</sup> One of their grandest projects was building Fantasy Park on Washington Avenue at the site of the current Grant Sawyer State Office Building. Recognizing the need for parks equipped with playgrounds for children, the League conceived of Fantasy Park which would be modeled after Disneyland’s “Tomorrow Land.” They convinced Union Pacific Railroad to donate a train engine, and through a correspondence campaign and various calls to the U.S. Air Force, obtained a jet trainer aircraft for the park.<sup>29</sup> The women commissioned Mexican artist Benjamin Dominguez to create a huge tortoise sculpture. The wives of architect, Gerald Moffit, and contractor, Tiberti Construction, were Service League women. Through fundraising efforts, the women purchased fencing, benches, trees, and playground equipment.<sup>30</sup> The park was then turned over to the city,

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<sup>26</sup> Dondero, interview with author.

<sup>27</sup> SL, Box 4.

<sup>28</sup> Purdue-Johnson, interview with author.

<sup>29</sup> *The Junior League of Las Vegas, Commemorative Biographies*, Florence Lee Jones Cahlan.

<sup>30</sup> SL, box 1. Also “The Sunday Scene,” *Las Vegas Sun*, 22 May 1966 features the grand opening of the park. Dondero, interview with author, describes the complexities involved in preparing the tortoise sculpture, especially the task of properly curing the cement.

forcing the public agency to assume responsibility for maintenance. The city eventually sold the property to the State of Nevada.

As with most nonprofit and charitable groups, raising revenues was a major priority. Unlike men's philanthropic organizations that were supported by monetary donations, women's groups relied on fundraising events.<sup>31</sup> During the 1950 and 1960s, annual benefits held in members' homes were the most successful events. Money raised was earmarked for a specific cause. In 1949, four hundred invited guests donated a total of \$1,750 that was used for a badly-needed, new library to replace the existing facility which was in a severe state of disrepair and inadequately furnished with books.<sup>32</sup> The following year, proceeds were donated to a speech treatment center for children, ensuring therapy services for eighty children with speech defects, to help fund a recreation room at the Southern Nevada Hospital for aged indigents. One of its most successful fundraising events was the 1955 benefit to raise money for the fund drive to raise \$35,000 to purchase land for the construction of the new Nevada Southern university. The entire community rallied to support this effort through various fundraising initiatives.<sup>33</sup> Through proceeds raised by the Service League's benefit that year, the fund met its goal.<sup>34</sup> These events became so successful that the *Las Vegas Sun* declared them the social event of the year.<sup>35</sup>

The League began a thrift shop as a means of earning a continuous revenue stream, but clothing was occasionally given to the needy, especially residents in Las

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<sup>31</sup> Fisher, 6.

<sup>32</sup> Kaufman, 464.

<sup>33</sup> Eugene P. Moehring and Michael S Green, *Las Vegas A Centennial History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005),160.

<sup>34</sup> "Service League Benefit Puts Nevada Southern Fund Drive Over the Top," *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 18 September 1955, Ronzone Family Papers, box1, folder 22.

<sup>35</sup> Hank Greenspun, "Where I Stand," *Las Vegas Sun*, [n.d.],SL, box 7.

Vegas' west side African American community. In 1949, a portion of funds raised were donated to the Westside community center. In 1967, they donated funds to the Westside Boy Scouts Council.<sup>36</sup> The Service League solicited donations from local businessmen and casino owners to provide young African American girls with bathing suits and undergarments.<sup>37</sup> Individual assistance also came in the form of delivering baskets of food to the poor, many of whom were Westside residents, visiting and running errands for shut-ins, purchasing medications, eyeglasses and other prosthetics for those in need, and even buying airline tickets for people who could not afford transportation to out of state hospitals for necessary medical attention.

The women perceived themselves as the “conscience of the community,”<sup>38</sup> and they transmitted this philosophy to their daughters through the Junior Service League, admitting girls of good character. They sought “the type of young women to whom we look to carry out future and civic activities,”<sup>39</sup> mostly League daughters. Annual cotillion balls were intended to benefit the children culturally and socially, enlarge their circle of friends, and increase their self-confidence. Boys and girls from eighth and ninth grades, not necessarily League members' children, were invited.<sup>40</sup>

The Service League applied gendered citizenship by engaging in community services recognized as women's areas, filling the void of unfunded and “unmet” needs in Las Vegas. Through their social status, they exerted a great deal of influence that allowed them to pursue and accomplish large scale projects. When asked about any perceived gender limitations, Mrs. Dondero indicated that the women did not feel

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<sup>36</sup> SL, box 1 and box 4.

<sup>37</sup> Dondero, interview.

<sup>38</sup> “Under the Yum Yum Tree” Event Program, 19 November 1963, SL, box 3.

<sup>39</sup> Fisher, 27.

<sup>40</sup> SL, box 4; Purdue-Johnson, interview.

restricted by their sex, admitting that she was partly influenced by Maude Frazier who once reassured her stating, “my dear, you can do anything you want to do.”<sup>41</sup>

While Cold War America touted a nuclear family with a woman’s place in the home, these women, while not in the paid workforce, were seldom home, but combined women’s homemaker responsibilities with community service. Purdue-Johnson remembered her children coloring over her calendar because she had so many social appointments.<sup>42</sup> The Service League was not involved in controversial political issues so League women with political interests joined the League of Women Voters, the Republican Women’s Club and similar organizations. When Leaguers attended local government boards and commission meetings, it was to learn about government activities and to “show and interest” in the various agencies.<sup>43</sup> Members who attended a National Security Seminar in 1961 did so to gain information that would assist them in improving the Las Vegas community.<sup>44</sup>

Their political activism was limited to initiatives such as circulating petitions supporting Las Vegas’ water rights to Lake Mead, and lobbying the State legislature to increase aid for dependent children and to fund services to the blind. At the School District’s invitation, they appointed a member to sit on the task force regarding school integration, and the Service League was listed as a cosponsor with the League of Women Voters of the Las Vegas Valley on a seminar discussing race relations in Las Vegas in 1968.<sup>45</sup> Some of these women went on to serve in government position. In 1969, the

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<sup>41</sup> Dondero, interview.

<sup>42</sup> Purdue-Johnson, interview.

<sup>43</sup> SL, box 5.

<sup>44</sup> “1961-1962 President’s Report,” SL, box 5.

<sup>45</sup> The League of Women Voters of Las Vegas Valley, box 1, folder 6, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

governor appointed Service League member, Mrs. Don Ackerman to the National Association of Women for Highway Safety. Mrs. Dondero served in several state appointed positions before becoming the first woman elected to the Board of Clark County Commissioners.

In the absence of public support, the League was the “go-to” organization for most of the social service agencies in town. The Service League at one time or another supported almost every welfare and educational institution in Las Vegas including the library, the county hospital, parks, facilities for the handicapped, and the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Their charitable work assisted many individuals and provided an invaluable service to health, education, and welfare organizations, but it was not a substitute for public support and funding. Some scholars regard philanthropic organizations such as the Service League as a “third-party government” because they deliver social welfare services that public entities fail to fund.<sup>46</sup> In a time when Las Vegas’ idea of helping the poor was to provide a ticket out of town,<sup>47</sup> the Service League helped deliver human services to many of Las Vegas’ neediest citizens. Through their understanding of their responsibilities that accompanied womanhood, they collaborated with the business and professional male establishment to assist the needy and worked for community betterment.

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<sup>46</sup> Franklin, “Women’s Voluntarism, Special Education, and the Junior League,” 417.

<sup>47</sup> Albert Deutsch, “The Sorry State of Nevada,” *Collier’s*, 18 March 1955, 75.

[www.unz.org/Pub/Colliers-1955mar18-00074](http://www.unz.org/Pub/Colliers-1955mar18-00074), accessed March 10, 2012.

## Chapter 4

### The Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Inc.: Women for Women

As the nineteenth century transitioned into the twentieth century, more middle-class women attended college. Between 1890 and 1918, the amount of women pursuing advanced degrees quadrupled from ten percent to forty percent of the graduate student population. College enrollments by women also soared. Between 1900 and 1920 women enrolling in public colleges increased by one thousand percent while those enrolling in private colleges increased by 482 percent. Seventy percent of the graduates from women's colleges worked at professional and business careers. A fraction of these women entered fields previously held exclusively by men.<sup>1</sup> Women worked as lawyers, doctors, insurance professionals, journalists, museum curators, stock brokers, and other diverse careers that were considered "unusual occupations for women"<sup>2</sup> in the early twentieth century.

Male professionals did not welcome women with open arms. Women were routinely confined to subordinate positions and often denied promotional opportunities. Women in academia were usually limited to work as research assistants and were rarely offered professorships even in women-only colleges. Many co-educational universities enforced quotas that limited female admissions. In retailing, women buyers encountered resistance as well. Men insisted on being promoted first and demanded control over high-volume, hard line products that paid higher commissions, leaving the less lucrative,

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<sup>1</sup> Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*, 99-100.

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. Geline MacDonald Bowman and Miss Earlene White, eds., *A History of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Inc., 1919-1944 inclusive*. (New York: National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, 1944), 19. (hereinafter cited as BPW-I).



“feminine” product lines such as perfume and women’s attire to the women.<sup>3</sup> Women bankers were limited to cashiering positions, and women stock brokers held subordinate, lower-salaried positions of “technician” rather than the men’s superior, higher-ranked position of “account executive”.<sup>4</sup> These and other exclusions devalued women’s worth in the workplace and created a glass ceiling.

In the early twentieth century, business and professional women attempted to join forces by forming professional organizations such as the American Association of University Women (AAUW), and women’s lawyer, banker, and physician associations, but because the organizations were sparsely populated and geographically fragmented, women had little power to effect change. The National Federation of Business and Professional Women (BPW) unified career and professional women. The BPW believed that it was not their sex, but external biases and barriers based on sex that limited their professional growth, and they launched campaigns to improve and elevate women’s economic status. In 1920, they urged the federal government to open all Civil Service examinations to both men and women and to confer official rank upon the nurses who served in the military during World War I. BPW members believed they had a responsibility to rise to their highest potential, so when a member from the Kansas Federation accepted the position as executive secretary for her local chamber of commerce, she did so because, “I owed it to my sex to insist on the proper recognition of service I was performing. Otherwise, I might be encouraging the idea that women are

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<sup>3</sup> Rosalind Rosenberg, *Beyond Separate Spheres: Intellectual Roots of Modern Feminism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982). This work discusses women who studied the social sciences at the turn of the twentieth century. William Leach, *Land of Desire: Merchants, Power, and the Rise of a New American Culture* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1993), 95.

<sup>4</sup> Chafe, *The Paradox of Change*, 100.

valuable only in subordinate positions.”<sup>5</sup> Her action exemplified the Federation’s overarching mission of women working for women.

For quite some time historians of women have ignored more conservative activist organizations like the Business and Professional Women’s (BPW) clubs, which worked to elevate women’s legal and economic status while adhering to established gender roles and standards of femininity. Recent scholars who are following the trajectory of feminism and the women’s movement are examining the civic and political engagement of conventional women’s organizations as a bridge between first and second wave feminism. Kathleen A. Laughlin’s probe of the Minnesota BPW clubs’ quest for full political and civic engagement during World War II and Cold War years led her to label these women as “civic” feminists, concluding that middle-class women who “embraced domesticity but also believed in responsible citizenship” and full enfranchisement as citizens created a link between suffrage and the women’s liberation moment.<sup>6</sup> While much of the BPW’s agenda found its way into the women’s movement, the women’s primary motive was to attain equal standing with men as citizens. This chapter will describe the strategies and tactics the women of the BPW and the Las Vegas Federation of Business and Professional Women used to achieve their full potential professionally, economically, and politically, and to permit women to contribute to public policy as full citizens.

The BPW members were working women who experienced gender discrimination most directly, through barriers in the work place. Their mission was to receive equal

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<sup>5</sup> *Independent Woman*, 3 (June 1921): 17, Nevada Federation of Business and Professional Women Collection, box 10, folder 3 (Reno: Nevada Historical Society). (hereinafter cited as NvBPW).

<sup>6</sup> Kathleen A. Laughlin, “Civic Feminists” in Casteldine and Laughlin, eds., *Breaking the Wave*, 12-13.

treatment in their careers, and to have a voice in governing. The membership, diverse in its occupations and opinions of how to secure economic justice and citizenship, contained anti-suffragists such as Ida Tarbell as well as feminist, Gail Laughlin, who, as head of the lawyers' committee for the National Woman's Party (NWP), influenced the NWP's opposition to protective legislation for women.<sup>7</sup> They did not adopt the GFWC's rhetoric of maternalism, but they did reference women's moral and spiritual values, especially during the Cold War. Their demands for equality were usually framed by ideas of social justice and merit.

Many members also belonged to conventional women's religious, fraternal, and philanthropic organizations in their community, including the GFWC, and participated in civic projects, such as building public parks, playgrounds, and libraries, typically associated with conventional women's civic engagement. In 1923, they defined a good citizen as one who made the community progressive.<sup>8</sup> During the Cold War, they maintained that women's moral superiority, spiritual values, and role as wife and mother were vital to national defense and security.<sup>9</sup> The women were concerned about how others would perceive them and especially wanted men's acceptance, both professionally and personally. They collaborated with the male power structure in business and politics, and many single women were also concerned that men may find female professionalism and intelligence unappealing.<sup>10</sup> Over time, especially after receiving more equitable

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<sup>7</sup> Laughlin, 121-122.

<sup>8</sup> BPW-I, 14, 34.

<sup>9</sup> Marguerite Rawalt, *A History of the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs 1944-1960* (Washington, D.C.: The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Inc., 1969), 226. (hereinafter cited as BPW-II).

<sup>10</sup> "Do Men Like Us?" *Independent Woman*, 2 (April 1929): 150-151, NvBPW, box 10. This article describes women's concerns that their accomplishments make them unappealing to men. BPW-I, 23. This tells that members were concerned that naming their new magazine, *Independent Woman*, might alienate men, who did not like woman being too independent.

treatment during the World War II job market, they became bolder in their demands for equality.

The National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, Inc. was born in direct response to the U.S. War Department's interest in creating a reserve of female labor to prevent a labor shortage during World War I. The Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA), working with the War Department as the War Work Council, conducted a national survey of business and professional women to collect that data. The investigation uncovered many scattered, local organizations where women attempted to unite. For the most part, in an environment where it was "every woman for herself,"<sup>11</sup> women seeking employment had no influence or power, and often were forced to accept whatever jobs were offered, regardless of professional training or education. By convincing the War Department that it was important to national security to identify a pool of capable, working women, the War Work Council brought professional women together. In 1918, with funding from the War Department, they invited business and professional women from each state east of the Rocky Mountains to attend a two-day conference in New York City in order to gauge interest and develop a plan for a national organization.

Each of the one hundred women invited attended, representing a wide range of occupations that included lawyers, doctors, educators, social workers, women in advertising and publicity, filing managers, factory and retail supervisors and workers, and even women who served in the military. They organized a national federation comprised of individual state chapters. Each chapter was allowed two delegates to attend and vote in the national conferences. The primary objective, to "encourage camradely relationship

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<sup>11</sup> BPW-I, 14.

among business and professional women; to inform them on civic and national questions, and to awaken them to a sense of citizenship responsibility,”<sup>12</sup> was not a sharp deviation from missions of many pre-suffrage women’s clubs civic missions, but it was unique in its recognition of working women.

By opening membership to any business or professional woman, regardless of status, the federation’s leadership declared itself as the only truly democratic women’s organization, but in the practice of the time, it was class-based and, of course, racially segregated.<sup>13</sup> The BPW did not acknowledge African American professional women until 1946 when they included “race” in their resolution for equal rights. They addressed race again in 1963, when the National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women, which originated in 1914, asked the BPW to support civil rights by engaging in biracial committees and training, integrating all women’s organizations, developing relationships with Negro committees, and helping to keep African American children in school.<sup>14</sup> In 1919, when most middle-class women were homemakers, the BPW considered their act of uniting a diverse range of white, working women a bold and democratic endeavor.

From the start, the Federation articulated its goal to elevate the status of business and professional women through sisterhood and education in their constitution:

To elevate the standards for women in business and the professions; to promote the interests of business and professional women; to stimulate local and state organizations; to bring about a spirit of cooperation among business and professional women of the United States; to extend

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<sup>12</sup> BPW-I, 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>14</sup> “Women Helping Women,” *National Business Women*, 43 (January 1964): 14.

opportunities to business and professional women through education along lines of industrial, scientific, and vocational activities.<sup>15</sup>

The first order of business was the “Organization and Consolidation of Woman Power.”<sup>16</sup>

The Federation conducted a national inventory of business and professional women, their professional status, opportunities in the work environment, and the level of their qualifications. The survey became the first of many studies used to disclose the condition of working women and to justify improvements. Data supported the BPW’s advocacy to raise standards for women’s job classifications and to promote women in industrial settings into supervisory positions. Subsequent studies also were used to create a national directory and to set the association’s overall agenda. The women established national standards for professional qualifications, exposed a gender gap in wages, and identified the barriers to career advancement for women.

As a group, they adhered to conventional gender roles through their membership in women’s religious, fraternal, and philanthropic associations, but the BPW was also socially progressive and sometimes radical in its ideology. In fact, the women believed that forming the federation and extolling their value as wage earners was a radical act since prior to this time, women’s entry into the business and professional world was scattered and largely ignored “just as there had been little recognition of the value of the civic activities of the home women.”<sup>17</sup> The BPW was one of the few clubs to identify its married members by their first names.

The women worked doggedly to eliminate gender discrimination and to defend married women who worked, yet as conventional Christian women, they respected the

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<sup>15</sup> BPW-I, 11

<sup>16</sup> BPW-I, 34.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 12.

ideals ascribed to womanhood and domesticity. A 1944 memorial tribute to, Geline McDonald Bowman of, citing “the myriad of simple wholesome things...her pride in her twin children...loyalty to ‘the best husband in the world’...affection of her employees...comradeship based on mutual respect...between her and the businessmen of her city...kindness to the ill and the unfortunate”<sup>18</sup> demonstrates members’ blending of feminine homemaking qualities with masculine business sense. First vice president, Eugenia Wallace was described as “gentle, but firm” in her interpersonal relations.<sup>19</sup> The women did not attack gender constructions, perhaps in part because they did not want to antagonize men, professionally or personally.

Pragmatically, members knew they needed the men’s support in accomplishing their mission. They relied on men’s cooperation in supporting BPW conventions, and advertising National Business Women’s Week when it was established in 1928. During National Business Women’s Week, each chapter staged elaborate community events to draw attention their goals and achievements. Their emphasis on “the citizenship responsibilities of business and professional women”<sup>20</sup> earned accolades from local and state elected officials, businessmen, and even clergy who praised the women’s contributions to the community in Sunday sermons.<sup>21</sup> Eventually, male hoteliers and merchants realized the economic benefits of hosting the BPW regional and national conferences. During the Twenties, through feminine powers of persuasion, the women

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., Dedication page.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 46-47.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 46.

convinced the strict, male-only Union Club of New York to permit them to enter the dining room if accompanied by a male member of the club.<sup>22</sup>

The BPW knew that men, in their positions of power in business and politics, held the key to attainment of equality in the work place so much of the BPW's strategies involved proving that they were as competent and capable as the men. During the Depression, in partnership with local merchants, they created campaigns encouraging housewives to shop.<sup>23</sup> They also advised men of ways in which working women contributed to the local economy. At one of its first conventions, one BPW member got the mayor's attention when she pointed out how the earning capacity of most of the women in the room translated into revenues that supported the city through consumption of local goods, payment of taxes, utilities, and real estate helped the city to prosper. In 1934, they couched their argument in the principles of social justice, acknowledging the connection between economic and social well-being, and adopted a declaration recognizing that "economic security to men and women as will assure to each individual the safeguards guaranteed by the Constitution of the United States" and demanding "employment, appointment, salaries, and promotions on equal terms with men" in the name of social justice.<sup>24</sup>

The organization focused its efforts on policies and initiatives that directly affected women's interests. They supported passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and joined the Women's Joint Congressional Congress's lobby to pass the Sheppard-Towner Bill. They advocated for widow's pensions, jury service for women, aid to dependent children, and public health initiatives. During the Depression, they worked to block

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 56, 64.



legislation that discriminated against married women who worked. Using data collected from their studies, they challenged the prevailing public opinion that married women worked for “pin money,” demonstrating that, like men, many working women had dependents to support. They emphasized working women’s contributions to the economy, paying taxes on \$3 billion of individual incomes and inheriting 70% of all bequeathed estates.<sup>25</sup> In collaboration with the Association of University Women, League of Women Voters, National Women’s Party and YWCA, they opposed the federal employment policy in which wives were first dismissed in households where both spouses lived together, and in 1939 they adopted a resolution declaring that the “right to work should not be abridged because of sex or economic or marital status,”<sup>26</sup> in support of equitable treatment of married women who worked.

Their quest to eliminate discrimination did not include government protective legislation. They believed that by eradicating discriminatory laws qualified women would advance naturally, through merit, and feared that ultimately, protective legislation could hurt their cause. They were so strong in this conviction that they adopted a non-intervention policy resolution at the 1920 biennial conference on the grounds that protective legislation was “liable to misinterpretation in cases of special application, and that, rather than advancing, it would probably retard the progress of women everywhere.”<sup>27</sup> They firmly held to this policy, and in 1962, when unions were supporting government regulation through an Equal Pay Bill, the BPW testified against

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 53-54, 64.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid., 65-67, 75.

<sup>27</sup>Ibid., 30.

it.<sup>28</sup> They opposed government-funded health insurance but supported Social Security provisions to include pensions for women.<sup>29</sup>

On both national and state and local levels, the membership worked tirelessly to protect employment of married women. The national campaign during the New Deal years to overturn federal policies of laying off women when both spouses worked, and to make the federal civil service system more open and equitable to women was largely unsuccessful, but some local clubs did make statewide gains. The Dallas, Texas chapter, joined with other interested local women's associations and successfully pressured city officials to reverse their policy of dismissing married women from municipal jobs. New Jersey claimed success in pushing legislation to increase women's legal rights; New York reported passage of bills for equal rights and equal pay, allowing women to serve on juries, and various other bills improving the condition of "women's industrial work;" and South Carolina was able to push legislation increasing teachers' salaries.<sup>30</sup> Individual states' efforts to gain equal rights for women did not guarantee a unified stance on support of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). The BPW did not endorse the ERA until 1937 when a new world order threatened democracy.

The BPW interpreted the emerging dictatorial governments in Europe and China as especially menacing to women. By 1935, Germany was restricting women from participating in public life, and China was dictating women's attire. In 1937, the BPW

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<sup>28</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble, *The Other Women's Movement. Workplace Justice and Social Rights in Modern America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 165.

<sup>29</sup> Alice Kessler-Harris, "Designing Women and Old Fools: Writing Gender into Social Security Law." in *Women's America 6<sup>th</sup> ed.* 435-447. This work examines how gender bias that reinforced women's economic dependence on men was instrumental in creating Social Security laws that resulted in allocating reduced benefits for women.

<sup>30</sup> BPW-I, 68. This discusses the work accomplished in Dallas, TX; 91-156. These pages summarize reports from individual states. Nevada's report did not include legislative action because reports prior to World War II were misplaced.

participated in a study initiated by the League of Nations and International Labor Organization about the status of women in other countries. The study yielded various endorsements of women's rights by the signatory countries that held:

the right to vote shall not be abridged by reasons of sex; there should be no distinction based on sex in their law and practice with relation to nationality; and there should be both men and women with full voting powers in all delegations to the Council and Assembly of the League.<sup>31</sup>

When, after many years of study and debate, the BPW finally endorsed the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) at the 1937 Atlantic City Convention, the jubilant supporters held a victory march on the Boardwalk.<sup>32</sup> Thereafter, support for the ERA was included in every BPW convention platform and, they persistently lobbied Congress for passage.

World War II proved to be an important stepping stone for the BPW's quest for equality. Gender barriers in the work environment were relaxed as women were employed in jobs previously reserved for men and appointed to state and local boards and commissions. The BPW showed its patriotism by participating in wartime efforts on the home front, and some members enlisted in the WACS, WAVES, and SPARS, but they also saw an opportunity for women to step up their pursuit of the ERA. In 1946, president Hickey reminded the membership that during the War "women stood side by side with men in every craft, skill and profession, often doing the same work, receiving, if they were lucky, the same pay, while carrying on the dual responsibility of home and job." Telling the group that "until women wake up to their potential influence, we are cheating ourselves and our government," she encouraged women to run for political office. Hickey criticized President Truman for failing to appoint women to positions of authority in his administration despite his admitted inability to find qualified men. She

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 74.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

pointed out that old patterns of discrimination against women were resurfacing and noted that the GI Bill of Rights resulted in women's exclusion from colleges and universities in order to make room for men.<sup>33</sup>

In an effort to retain the political and economic gains realized during the war, the BPW re-energized their push for passage of the ERA and Equal Pay legislation. In 1947, they created a brochure entitled, *The Equal Rights Amendment – Why Business and Professional Women Support It*, and distributed it to each member of Congress as well as the print and broadcasting media.<sup>34</sup> In 1956, with an unprecedented support Congress, they refashioned the brochure, under the title, *Do You Have Equal Rights?* and redistributed it in continued pursuit of the bill.<sup>35</sup> They understood the power of coalitions and often partnered with the National Women's Party, YWCA, AAUW, the League of Women Voters, and other specific professional and activist groups to effect change. In order to ensure rapid communication and cooperation among groups, they maintained a liaison roster of the leading national and international women's organizations.<sup>36</sup>

Equal Rights carried with it equal responsibility as a citizen, and the BPW supported women who served in the military. After World War I, they lobbied for women who served in the military to become commissioned and eligible for pensions. In World War II, the BPW considered supporting compulsory registration of women for selective service, and took polls to attitudes among the Federations members and other women. This issue percolated for some time without clear consensus. In 1950, when president Sarah T. Hughes unilaterally drafted and sent a bill to Congress recommending

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<sup>33</sup> BPW-II, 23.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 176.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 175.

federal legislation requiring women to register under the Selective Service Act in the interests of national security and non-discrimination, a heated debate among the members ensued. Proponents reasoned that equal rights meant equal responsibility, and opponents deemed the bill unnecessary, contending that if the need arose, the government would draft everyone, regardless of sex.<sup>37</sup> They were united, however, in assisting female veterans returning from the war and established a Federation Service Women Project to reintegrate women veterans into their communities, and to help them find jobs. They also offered financial assistance to retrain women for civilian work and for loans to attend school.

During the Cold War, the women, relying on maternalism and moral authority, emphasized women's special morality and spirituality as a force against Communism and the new world order. In 1956 they praised a member from the Kansas federation who was honored as Mother of the Year.<sup>38</sup> President Grace Daniels cautioned the membership to hold "firmly to essential moral and spiritual values in order to absorb the terrifying changes of the Space Age<sup>39</sup> and declared that it was time for women's genius to be unleashed to help preserve democracy and peace. She encouraged the membership to become educated and to be prepared to assume leadership positions in Civil Defense, government, and the space program. By adhering to the principles of equal rights and eliminating of discriminatory laws and practices, women would rise into positions that would enable them to contribute their talents to shaping government policy. Without a federal equal rights amendment, each chapter pursued equal citizenship on a state-by-state basis resulting in different levels of women's rights.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>38</sup> *Independent Woman*, 35 (November 1956): 25, NvBPW, box 10.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 213, 226.

Nevada joined the BPW in 1929, with Reno, Elko, and Fallon being the first chapters. Four years later, in May 1932, the Las Vegas Federation of Business and Professional Women (LVBPW) held its organizational meeting in the Apache Hotel on Fremont and Second Street.<sup>40</sup> The women met on the first and third Monday of each month, reserving the first meeting for business and the second for social activities. Records from the early years are unavailable, but by 1942, they had sixty members. The population in Las Vegas was 8,422 residents. Women accounted for approximately twenty three percent of the work force, excluding those who worked within family businesses without pay. Almost half worked in professional, sales or office management occupations.<sup>41</sup> Teachers, nurses, shop owners, musicians, bookkeepers, hotel operators, a lawyer, and even a mortician joined the federation. Many of these women also belonged to traditional women's civic organizations, including the Mesquite Club, Red Cross, Girl Scouts, and PTA, but as part of the LVBPW they were concerned with economic equality.

Membership included entrepreneurs and trailblazers. Retailer Bertha Ronzone started the only privately-owned retail chain in Nevada, and Trudi Radin, owner of Trudi's Furs, claimed to be the only woman furrier in Nevada. Maude Frazier's accomplishments and contributions as an educator and Nevada State legislature are well documented as is the work of Flora Dungan. Less known is Dorothy Brimacombe who rose to local, state, and national office in the BPW. Born in Illinois and raised in Seattle,

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<sup>40</sup> *Las Vegas Age*, 5 May 1932.

<sup>41</sup> Source: for population statistics see [www.lasvegasnevada.gov/factsstatistics/history/html](http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/factsstatistics/history/html); for statistics on working women in Las Vegas, J. Goodwin, PhD, Associate Professor, University of Las Vegas, Nevada.

Dorothy Redenbaugh<sup>42</sup> came of age during the Twenties when women shed many of the Victorian values and rejected feminist thought, believing they could blend career and marriage. Brimacombe constantly sought change and growth. She attended normal school, and taught elementary school before returning to the Oregon State University to earn her bachelor's degree. She then taught journalism and worked in the accounting office at the University of Washington for two years before becoming the second woman to sign with Six Companies, the joint venture hired to construct Boulder Dam. Her arrival into Las Vegas was another first and an adventure in itself when she flew into Las Vegas from Los Angeles, the first women to arrive by air, strapped to a mail sack.<sup>43</sup>

Two years later, she left Six Companies to work for the *Las Vegas Age* and eventually became the managing editor. It was here that she met Al Brimacombe, whom she married in 1935. The Brimacombes purchased majority ownership in the failing newspaper, but eventually sold it and opened Brimmies, a printing shop and stationery store with two locations in downtown Las Vegas. After learning she could not have children, Brimacombe focused her energy on civic work, attaining leadership positions in each organization she joined. She became president of the Mesquite Club, and the local chapters of the American Association of University Women (AAUW) and Altrusa Clubs. She served as president of the Nevada Press Women and National Federation of Press Women's clubs between 1943 and 1947. She was also elected president of the Las Vegas and Nevada BPW chapters during this same time frame.

Her inexhaustible energy and commitment to the BPW's mission to encourage women to participate in partisan politics led her to organize the Republican Women's

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<sup>42</sup>Blackman, "Biographies of Past Presidents," MCR, box 23.

<sup>43</sup> Alfred J. Brimacombe with Stephen S. Neal, Transcript, 23 February 1981, 7-8, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

Clubs in Southern Nevada and to run for Nevada State Assembly four times. Her experience in accounting and journalism served her well. She became publicity chairman for the Salvage Committee during World War II, publicity chairman of the Las Vegas and State BPW, news service chairman of the National Federation in 1954-56 and national Treasurer in 1956-60. She did not slow down after completing political and club work. In 1970 she started Nike House, a home for abused young girls. Dorothy passed away in October 1989, leaving a trail of accomplishments that few people, women or men, could duplicate.

Dorothy Brimacombe and the women in the federation functioned according to conventional gender expectations. When the President of the Nevada BPW endorsed Dorothy Brimacombe's candidacy for treasurer of the National Federation, she praised Dorothy's good nature, likeability, and feminine qualities.<sup>44</sup> The federation praised Bertha Ronzone when she received the "Nevada Golden Rule Pioneer Mother" Award in 1959, and when they elected her as outstanding citizen, it was because of her faith, courage, and cheerfulness, her spiritual and moral strength, love of people, affection, kindness, and understanding to friends and family.<sup>45</sup> The women brought their femininity into the masculine domains. Dorothy Brimacombe entered politics, Bertha Ronzone served as president of the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, and member, Maude Frazier, stood toe-to-toe with some of Nevada's most powerful legislators. These ladies along with the rest of the LVBPW displayed a competence that equaled their male colleagues.

From its inception, the LVBPW established themselves as equal partners in the community by participating in local civic and political activities. At least one member

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<sup>44</sup> NVBPW, box 20.

<sup>45</sup> Sally Watkins, "Bertha B. Ronzone" in *Skirts That Swept the Desert Floor* (Las Vegas: Stephens Press and Nevada Women's History Project, 2007), 157.



participated in charities like the Community Chest, Red Cross, the school hot lunch program, and the Community Christmas Tree. By entering a prize-winning float in the Labor Day Parade, they demonstrated that they had just as much of a vested interest in the town as the men. They proved that they were partners in securing Las Vegas' success as a tourist destination by contributing to the school of tourism and to the Live Wire Fund, a funding mechanism for promoting tourism. They promoted Las Vegas as a resort destination at every opportunity. At the 1949 State Convention of the NvBPW, each chapter presented a golden key symbolizing their community. Boulder City's key expressed Perseverance; Henderson's key expressed Industry, and Las Vegas' key expressed "Glamour and Glitter and Fun In the Sun."<sup>46</sup> In their monthly radio broadcast, the BPW featured a segment entitled, "Boost Your Town; It Boosts You." They used person-in-the-street interviews to educate locals about the questions most frequently asked by tourists, so that all citizens could be good will ambassadors for Las Vegas tourism. They were proud to be the only women's organization invited to joint meetings with the Lions Club, Rotary Club, and Chamber of Commerce, interpreting this as full recognition of their organization as a service club and not merely a sorority.<sup>47</sup>

The LVBPW devoted a substantial portion of its energy to establishing education programs for interested businesswomen. They held clinics for small businesswomen that provided mentoring and support. Their radio and, later, television programs, regularly featured a member who discussed her career experience, followed by professional and business advice. Members were available to offer advice whenever approached.

Luncheon meetings covered topics from understanding probate laws to deciphering

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<sup>46</sup> *Nevada Business Woman* (1949): 12; Annual Report of Las Vegas Business and Professional Women, 1950-51, NvBPW, box 18.

<sup>47</sup> Annual Report, 1949-1950, 8, box 18.

financial statements. The assistance provided was intended to do more than just help women become financially savvy and successful in business. It was a critical component of good citizenship. The LVBPW philosophized that one had to earn one's right to have a place in society and in one's community.<sup>48</sup> They carried this principle to the younger generation by educating and encouraging young girls who showed an interest in pursuing careers. Working with young women was so important, that education was a standing committee.

The LVBPW focused on training future career women who would become contributing members of the community. The organization not only joined the Mesquite Club and Service League in transmitting middle-class values of citizenship, they added dimension by fostering ideals of economic independence and contribution to the community. In the late Forties and early Fifties, Las Vegas was still a very small town, and Vegas High School was the only secondary school in Las Vegas. The LVBPW held Girls Week to educate high school girls about careers. Their radio and television programs allowed girls to interview BPW members in the series, "So You Want to Become a Career Girl."<sup>49</sup> The LVPBW education loan fund assisted girls who were interested in pursuing higher education and careers. They enhanced the Nevada Citizens Committee, an agency that retrained and assisted older women seeking employment, by including efforts to help young girls find employment. They knew education was essential if women were to achieve their fullest potential and become prepared to shape national and international events, not merely as women but as full citizens.

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<sup>48</sup> Minutes, Box 18, book 2.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. Box 18

The LVBPW perceived themselves to be ambitious individuals as well as women. To that end they were involved in a broad range of civic involvement. In the early days of the Club, they joined other charitable groups interested in public health issues by supporting and lobbying for inspections to ensure milk supplies. The influx of new residents brought about by the promise of employment at the Dam exacerbated the problems of proper handling of sewage and waste. The LVBPW joined in campaign for adequate sanitary disposal of sewage. During the Depression, they donated funds to aid victims of rheumatic fever, a major health problem resulting from the Scarlet Fever pandemic of the early twentieth century. The continuation of the disease after World War II prompted them to raise funds to build a clinic in Clark County. They also supported construction of a sanitarium for tuberculosis in Nevada, an unsuccessful attempt. During and after the War, they were involved in Civil Defense measures, involving training and first aid. As post-war expansion led to leap frog development in Las Vegas, speeding vehicles along stretches of new roads resulting in increased traffic accidents and fatalities. The LVBPW convinced the Clark County Civic Federation to impose speed limits.<sup>50</sup>

Their most focused public and political activism was reserved for women's issues, especially for married women, who were most restricted by discriminatory laws. The LVBPW partnered with the Nevada federation in studying and identifying state laws that were detrimental to women and proposed bills to the State Legislature that would assist women. They had their work cut out for them. Inadequate funding of public health services resulted in breaking up families who were forced to send children out of state to receive health care for communicable diseases like tuberculosis and polio, services for

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<sup>50</sup> Dorothy Brimacombe served on the Clark County Civic Federation.

developmentally challenged children, or correctional training for delinquent or at-risk girls. Nevada allocated a minimum of funding to social services such as widows pensions and aid to dependent children despite decades of continuous lobbying by women's organizations to increase financial assistance for women and families. Many Nevada laws directly limited women's control over their economic and legal well being. Married working women did not have legal control over their earnings. Probate laws, wage laws, and divorce laws placed men squarely in control of family assets. While women were not excluded from jury duty after suffrage, laws liberally exempted women from serving on juries. The LVBPW and the Nevada BPW opposed all legislation that limited women's rights, and campaigned for legislation guaranteeing equal pay and equal rights for women.<sup>51</sup>

Lobbying was not enough to eradicate discrimination or obtain services needed to support needy families. Direct participation in partisan politics was the answer, and the women rose to the challenge. Dorothy Brimacombe participated in partisan politics as well as Maude Frazier and later Flora Dungan who was also LVBPW president during the early Sixties. Maude Frazier, Las Vegas' school superintendent, a community activist, and the LVBPW's First Vice President, ran for the Nevada State Legislature and was elected in 1950. She served in the Legislature for twelve years. Frazier was instrumental in introducing legislation that served women's interests. She was influential in passing legislation that increased the minimum wage for women, increased Aid to Dependent Children, funding a school for handicapped children, and improving conditions of the Nevada State Mental. Frazier believed that women could accomplish whatever they set their minds to do and was not intimidated by her male colleagues in the

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<sup>51</sup> BPW-II, 309.

Legislature. On one occasion, she testified in support of a bill to fund education, directly opposing one of Clark County's powerful Senators. When the senator chided her that, "sometimes you have to act like a politician," Frazier instantly retorted, "I didn't expect you to act like a politician, I expected you to act like a senator."<sup>52</sup>

Accountant and LVBPW president in 1961, Flora Dungan, was active in the Democrat Central Committee, the NAACP, and was elected to the Nevada State Assembly in 1962. She was the first woman to serve on the Legislative Judiciary Committee and fought for prison reform. She later served as a UNLV regent and with her husband, founded Focus, a facility to help troubled youth which gained national recognition. Dungan also joined the League of Women Voters.<sup>53</sup> These women, like those in other state chapters, participated in bi-partisan, electoral politics, but their opportunity to have women's concerns examined fully came with the 1960 election of John F. Kennedy as President.

The national BPW and other women's organizations that supported the Kennedy campaign were disappointed at his failure to appoint women to high government posts. Groups like the BPW and National Women's Party urged him to support the Equal Rights Amendment. Instead, he created the Commission on the Status of Women in 1961 and encouraged states to do the same. The Commission was actually an anti-ERA measure created in 1944 by the League of Women Voters, the Women's Trade Union League, and the National Consumer League, as the National Committee to Defeat the Unequal Rights Amendment. In 1947 they renamed the coalition to the National Committee on the Status

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<sup>52</sup> A.D. Hopkins. Maude Frazier: *Breaking the Mold. The First 100. Part I: The Early Years.* (<http://www.1st100.com/part1/frazier.html>), accessed 5 March 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Guide to Flora Dungan Papers, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

of Women with the goal of instituting a presidential commission to study the status of women and make recommendations based upon solid data.<sup>54</sup> The prevailing conservative political climate that existed during World War II and the post-war decades prevented the coalition from advancing its plan, but President Kennedy's election, the shift toward liberalism, and the burgeoning civil rights movement created a more fertile environment for change.

On December 14, 1961, the President issued Executive Order 10980, establishing the President's Commission on the Status of Women, to continue through October 1, 1963.<sup>55</sup> The President appointed women from various professions, industries, and organizations, including BPW member, Margaret Rawalt, an ERA proponent.<sup>56</sup> The recommendations from the President's Commission on the Status of Women spurred the passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963,<sup>57</sup> but rather than endorse an amendment guaranteeing equal rights for women, the Commission proposed advancing women's equality under the Fourteenth Amendment through the Supreme Court.<sup>58</sup>

President Kennedy agreed to encourage state governors to hold commissions, and in 1963 the Nevada BPW voted to petition Democratic Governor Grant Sawyer, to create a Nevada Commission.<sup>59</sup> In April 1964 at the Nevada State Convention of the Business

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<sup>54</sup> Jone Johnson Lewis, [http://www.about.com/od/laws/a/status\\_women.htm](http://www.about.com/od/laws/a/status_women.htm), accessed 10 March 2012.

<sup>55</sup> Executive Order 10980, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58918>, accessed 10 March 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Salli Vargas, "History of the Mississippi Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs 1924-1995." (PhD dissertation, Mississippi State University, 2004) ProQuest (3133959), 127.

<sup>57</sup> Johnson Lewis, [http://www.about.com/od/laws/a/status\\_women.htm](http://www.about.com/od/laws/a/status_women.htm)

<sup>58</sup> Vargas, "History of Mississippi Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, 127. Susan M. Hartmann, *The Other Feminists: Activists in the Liberal Establishment*. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998), 62-66. The recommendation was based on a memorandum authored by attorney, Pauli Murray, arguing that the Supreme Court "could be persuaded to apply the equal protection clause to women." This strategy did not yield immediate results, but sex was included under Title VII of the Civil Right Act of 1964, and in 1970 the Supreme Court supported including women in jury service.

<sup>59</sup> Nevada BPW Minutes, 19 April 1963, NvBPW box 18.

and Professional Women, Governor Sawyer announced the creation of the Nevada Commission on the Status of Women. Stating that the commission was being created at the request of the late President John F. Kennedy, Governor Sawyer expected the commission to be an “outline for the demolition of barriers which hold women from full partnership in our society.”<sup>60</sup> Hope Roberts, the president of the Nevada Federation of the BPW, chaired what became the first Commission. In 1967 under Republican Governor Paul Laxalt established a second commission, and in 1970, Governor Mike O’Callaghan folded it into a Commission on the Status of People.<sup>61</sup>

The initial study examined a spectrum of conditions that created barriers for women from studying the effects of working mothers on children, protective legislation, and practices and laws that limited women. Responding to criticisms that working mothers bred juvenile delinquency and emotionally deprived children, the Commission agreed with studies that concluded that there was insufficient evidence to support the hypotheses. They promoted day care for working mothers on the grounds that it was aid to low-income, working women who could not afford child care services. Any form of protective legislation, including minimum working hours for women and segregating jobs by sex were to be repealed as discriminatory and limiting.<sup>62</sup>

The efforts continued when Republican Governor Paul Laxalt, appointed a second commission in 1967 during his term in office. In addition to the Nevada BPW, women’s organizations who sponsored the study included the AAUW, Toastmistress clubs,

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<sup>60</sup>“Governor Lauds Women ” *Nevada State Journal*, 18 April 1964, 13.  
<http://newspaperarchives.com>, accessed 15 March 2012.

<sup>61</sup> State of Nevada, *Governor’s Commission on the Status of Women* (Carson City, 1967) in State of Nevada, *Governor’s Commission on the Status of People*, (Carson City, 1970), Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas.

<sup>62</sup> “Working Women: Report, Recommendations.” *Nevada State Journal*, 16 August 1966, 17,  
<http://newspaperarchives.com>. accessed 15 March 2012.

American Business Women's Club, Soroptimists, Republican Women's Clubs, LPN association, Zonta,<sup>63</sup> American Institute of Banking Women, and Doctor's Wives Auxiliary. Civil Rights activists from Las Vegas' African American community were recognized when Margaret Crawford, Bernice Moten, and Ruby Duncan were appointed to the commission.

With the inclusion of sex in Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the percolating women's liberation movement, the committee demanded bolder changes to laws that limited women's ability to control their lives and participate fully as citizens. More controversial issues such as repeal of all abortion laws that penalized women and eliminating a child's legitimacy from birth certificates were introduced. Based on findings from the League of Women Voters' study of working women's need for child care, they advocated public sponsorship of day care services. The committee demanded repealing all laws that gave husbands control of their wives wages and stipulated that laws exempting women from jury duty be eliminated on the grounds that it prevented women from participating as full citizens. Finally, the Nevada BPW, Nevada Chapter of the AAUW, Nevada Federation of Republican Women, and Nevada Nurses Association submitted signed affidavits calling for immediate passage of the Equal Rights Amendment as originally worded.

Final recommendations memorialized the long-standing mission of the BPW. The Commission recommended assisting qualified women to obtain suitable employment, breaking down sex barriers that hampered women entrepreneurs attempting

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<sup>63</sup> Zonta is an exclusive and elite service organization. Started in Buffalo, NY, in 1917 by Margaret deForrest, the organization admitted only one woman from a specific profession. Past members include Amelia Earhart. Several BPW members, including federal Judge Sarah T. Hughes who swore Lyndon B. Johnson as President after President Kennedy's assassination were members of Zonta. Las Vegas Flora Dungan was also a member. For further information about Zonta see <http://www.zonta.com>.



to start small business, enabling full citizenship for women and encouraging the public and private sectors to recognize women as full citizens of Nevada; compiling and maintaining a roster of women qualified to be appointed to policy-making positions within the state government, addressing problems of women re-entering the workplace, and supporting equal pay for comparable work.<sup>64</sup> If followed, the mandates would enable women to rise to their highest potential as valued citizens, equal in status to their male counterparts, finally realizing the quest for full recognition as citizens that began in 1919.

The Federation of Business and Professional Women began in 1919 as a World War I security measure, but it instantly became a forum through which working women battled discrimination and gender barriers in employment. Membership included mostly white, native-born married and non-married women from various professional, business, and industrial work. Their mission was to unify working women, to elevate standards for women in business and professional careers, and to create an equal playing field that would allow women to rise according to merit. The group believed they were equal to men in professional capabilities but also a special perspective from their position as women.

The women supported many causes associated with their gender and maintained the standard of middle-class, feminine behavior, but their priority was to gain economic and legal equality. They realized that they had to forge cooperative business relationships with men in order to be successful, especially since men were often their superiors in the business world. They lobbied for removal of legal barriers that prevented women from earning equal pay, controlling their assets, or from being recognized as full citizens. They did not support protective legislation but preferred to obtain equal pay and

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<sup>64</sup>State of Nevada, *Governor's Commission on the Status of Women* (Carson City, 1967).

opportunities through their merit. By balancing a duality of demonstrating equal ability in the workplace with the special contributions they could make as women, the LVBPW maneuvered within their gender roles to improve women's legal and economic status and claim equal standing as citizens.

## Chapter 5

### The League Of Women Voters Of The Las Vegas Valley: Informed Citizenship

On May 27, 1964, the *Las Vegas Sun* announced the arrival of the League of Women Voters by declaring, “Local Group of Determined Gals Forms League of Women Voters.”<sup>1</sup> The article went on to describe the organization’s agenda, but it did not reveal the years of determined effort that went into forming the organization. On May 18, 1957, Mrs. Gale Scofield wrote the League of Women Voters’ national office (National) requesting authorization to start a Las Vegas chapter of the League of Women Voters. She explained that cronyism and closed-door politics made it nearly impossible for small businessmen like her husband to prosper in Las Vegas. She and wives of other small businessmen were upset that their husbands could not compete against such collusion and wealth and hoped that a local chapter would open business opportunities by forcing a more transparent government in Las Vegas. While sympathetic, National advised Mrs. Scofield that Las Vegas’ population was too small to support an independent chapter.<sup>2</sup> In 1961 and 1962, a handful of Las Vegas women again attempted to start a chapter. Orvis Stock, president of the Nevada League of Women Voters, asked California director, Jean Holmer, to make an assessment. Holmer, who last visited the area in 1948 when Las Vegas was a small western town with some gaming on Fremont Street, was not prepared for the growth she observed. Population had doubled, and the new Strip was

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<sup>1</sup> “Local Group of Determined Gals Forms League of Women Voters,” *Las Vegas Sun*, 27 May 1964, records of the League of Women Voters of the Las Vegas Valley, box 1, folder 6, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. (hereafter cited as LWVLV Collection).

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

attracting approximately eleven million visitors annually. She was overwhelmed by the flamboyance of Las Vegas Strip and of the many Las Vegas women residents.<sup>3</sup>

Despite the impressive growth, once again the verdict was that Las Vegas could not support an independent chapter. Women who were potential leaders were too closely affiliated with partisan politics, either individually or through their husbands' positions as party leaders or elected officials. Bylaws mandated that women serving as officers could not endorse or be perceived to endorse specific political parties or candidates. While the bylaws acknowledged women as independent agents, officers or potential officers were subject to a higher level of scrutiny to ensure that there was no perception of partisanship. Holmer was also concerned about Thelma Toms' membership in the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and her involvement in the civil rights movement in Las Vegas.<sup>4</sup> Finally, in 1964 with the influx of professional women who were connected to Southern Nevada University and experienced in League work, the League of Women Voters of the Las Vegas Valley (LWVLV) was born.

The persistence in establishing a Las Vegas chapter signifies recognition of the League's legacy of educating women about the political system and encouraging them to become involved in electoral politics. Gender separation was prevalent in the mid-Sixties, and politics was still considered a man's game, whereas women were still expected to marry and raise families. The League of Women Voters was an acceptable way for middle-class homemakers to participate in politics. Jennifer A. Stevens credits

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<sup>3</sup> Jean Ford Collection, box 1, folder 6, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada at Las Vegas (hereinafter cited as JFC). Statistics on population growth in Clark County from 1910 to 1964, box 4, folder 12. According to data, in 1950 population was 48,289, increasing to 127,016 in 1960 and over 240,000 in 1964. In 1963, Las Vegas had 11.8 million visitors.

<sup>4</sup> LWVLV Collection, box 1.

the League of Women Voters for enabling women to become involved in shaping more male-driven policies by urging Portland Oregon's city planners to adopt a more urban-style master plan than the suburban sprawl that was popular during that time.<sup>5</sup> In this chapter, I will discuss ways in which the LWV, in existence for a brief portion of the period under study, became a force in shaping local politics and civic policy, particularly in the area of racial equality.

After passage of the Nineteenth Amendment granting woman suffrage, Carrie Chapman Catt and the National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA), formed the League of Women Voters in 1920 to educate newly enfranchised women voters about the political process. It was non-partisan in that it did not endorse individual candidates or political parties, but the association was actively involved in explaining the political process and investigating, and taking positions on civic concerns. From its inception, The League examined political and social policies, and after much deliberation, publicized their official positions. In the 1920s it was the lead organization and information clearinghouse for the Women's Joint Congressional Congress, a coalition of women's organizations that lobbied for women's welfare and independent citizenship. However, the League of Women Voters did not limit their focus to women's concerns. They examined and studied a broad range of policy and legislative initiatives, both nationally and locally through their chapters.

The League of Women Voters participated in international politics. They supported President Wilson's plan for a League of Nations and a World Court after World War I and after World War II, they sent a delegate to Europe to take part in

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<sup>5</sup> Jennifer A. Stevens, "Feminizing Portland, Oregon" in Casteldine and Laughlin. *Breaking the Wave, Women, Their Organizations, and Feminism, 1945-1985*. 156.

international peace discussions. During World War II they assisted President Franklin Roosevelt by verifying and disseminating updates about the War. In order to become full participants in the political process, they reasoned, women had to understand the total political landscape. After World War II, they supported a range of liberal movements, including civil rights and environmentalism, both nationally and through their local chapters.<sup>6</sup> By the mid-Sixties, League women were running for local office, serving on municipal boards and committees that developed and oversaw public policy, and supporting civil rights, environmental concerns, and consumer affairs.<sup>7</sup>

Local chapters built grassroots movements targeted toward passage of the federal Clean Water Act. Using their strategy to investigate and educate, they informed local and regional communities of the dangers of industrial and municipal pollution, and offered potential solutions.<sup>8</sup> They relied on their studies and data to support the Women's Liberation Movement, backing initiatives for women's reproductive rights, passage of the Equal Rights amendment, and endorsing federal assistance and programs for working women with dependent children.

A Las Vegas League finally became reality in 1964, after Southern Nevada University became an accredited four-year university. Women affiliated with the university, specifically Lucille Wright (wife of the university's history professor, John S. Wright) and Mrs. Ann Zorn (wife of history professor and university president, Roman

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<sup>6</sup> Louise Merwin Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), gives a comprehensive history of the League of Women Voters.

<sup>7</sup> Susan Ware, "American Women in the 1950s: Nonpartisan Politics and Women's Politicization," in Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin, eds., *Women, Politics, and Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), 293.

<sup>8</sup> Terianne K. Shulte, "Citizen Experts: The League of Women Voters and Environmental Conservation," *Frontier: A Journal of Women Studies* 30 (September 2009): 3. "Grassroots at the Water's Edge: The League of Women Voters and the Struggle to Save Lake Erie 1956-1970," (PhD diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 2006), Proquest (3226676). These works discuss the League of Women Voters as a strong impetus for the modern environmentalism.

Zorn) formed the nucleus of the organization. Many brought previous League experience to Las Vegas. Donna Ashelman, a Phi Beta Kappa, with a degree in Sociology, served on the Board of the Nebraska League of Women Voters and worked for the *Las Vegas Review Journal* when she moved to Las Vegas with her attorney husband. Weonna (sic) Harves belonged to the Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania League; UCLA graduate, Jackie Stormson, was active in many League chapters in California and was the president of the Frankfort, Kentucky chapter. Carole Bailey served on the board of the Lawrence, Kansas League of Women Voters and as an officer in the Phoenix, Arizona League. Many members also belonged to the American Association of University Women.

The first president of record was Kathaleen Richards, but it was Jean Ford who led the organization to full recognition after only one year of provisional status, a year ahead of schedule. Ford arrived in Las Vegas in 1962 with her dermatologist husband, and two young daughters. A traditional, middle-class homemaker, she immediately volunteered to work for the Clark County library and the Red Rock preservation area. Ford was hard-working, serious, and reserved. Dorothy Eisenberg recalled that Ford's intellectual superiority was the driving force which held women to a high standard of involvement. Member Margaret Cahill remembered that when Ford joined, she agreed to do as much research as she could but insisted she would never be able to speak into a microphone.<sup>9</sup> Jean Ford ultimately became State Senator Ford and a powerful and respected voice in the Nevada State Legislature.

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<sup>9</sup> Caryll Batt Dzedziak. *An Interview with Dorothy Eisenberg, an Oral History* (LV: Las Vegas Women's Oral History Project, Women's Research Institute of Nevada, University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2007), 46. For Margaret Cahill, LWVLV Collection, box 4, folder 4.

Most of the women were wives, mothers, and community volunteers. Luana Marshall, wife of the City Attorney for Las Vegas, a teacher and mother of five, was named Outstanding Citizen in 1965 for her work with Easter Seals, the Mothers March of Dimes, and as president of the Crestwood School PTA. Marshall, a Las Vegas native, also chaired the LWVLV's telephone committee. Naomi Millisor was such a dedicated homemaker that she once attended a seminar on how to be the perfect wife.<sup>10</sup> Dorothy Eisenberg brought her love of politics to Las Vegas from her hometown of Philadelphia combining it with her role as a homemaker. A wife and mother of three daughters, she joined the LWVLV soon after moving to Las Vegas and was visibly active in the Las Vegas civil rights movement. When asked if her activism impacted her husband's accounting business, she replied, "some people might complain to Paul, but he took it well." Dorothy believed that he was content because she continued to fulfill all her domestic responsibilities, maintaining a smoothly run home, a comfortable domestic life, and full social life.<sup>11</sup> Dorothy Eisenberg recalled that she often brought her children with her to her political meetings and demonstrations.<sup>12</sup>

Ideologically, the LVWLV often leaned toward liberalism, believing the government should take an active role in assuring equality and social justice. The members thoroughly studied issues and were confident in their conclusions. While officially non-partisan, they had a vested interest in the outcomes of elections because of their positions on issues that affected the community and their own platforms. After one disappointing election, some women wanted the League to endorse candidates. In a

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<sup>10</sup> Caryll Batt Dziedziak. "Gendering Nevada Politics: The ERA Ratification Campaign 1973-1981" (PhD diss., University of Nevada, Las Vegas, 2010), 73.

<sup>11</sup> Dziedziak, *Eisenberg Oral History*, 55, 52.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*



heated, internal debate, opponents pointed out that partisan politics could jeopardize funding and limit their access to elected and public officials, severely weakening their ability to obtain the information they needed to properly evaluate local policies and issues. They felt the organization's strength would be compromised, rendering it almost powerless. In the end, the LWVLV abided by the national bylaws, but the controversy illuminated the need to develop succession plans for leadership positions.<sup>13</sup>

In accordance with National's policy, they thoroughly studied community concerns such as educational needs, organized activities for youth, local parks, and especially voting records of state and local elected officials in preparation for their first project, a "Know Your County" brochure.<sup>14</sup> The women held workshops for the general public featuring candidate forums and debates, instructions on how to vote, and encouraging voter registration. Prior to the 1964 election, they questioned the candidates about their positions on foreign aid, civil rights, and domestic economic policies, publishing each candidate's response or refusal to respond in the local newspapers. As part of the National program, the LWVLV scheduled a National Women's Voter Week in September 1964. Hank Greenspun's rather condescending editorial in the *Las Vegas Sun* reflected the long-standing myth that women neither voted nor were interested in politics. The article, entitled "The Ladies, Bless 'Em, A Mystery" stating that "women fight to get something and when they get it, no longer want it" described the event but reinforced the myth that women were disinterested in politics.<sup>15</sup>

The LWVLV was very much interested in politics. Unlike the other women's organizations in this study, they did not engage in social, charity or philanthropic

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<sup>13</sup> LWVLV Collection, box 4, folder 4.

<sup>14</sup> LWVLV Collection, box 1, folder 6.

<sup>15</sup> *Las Vegas Sun*, "The Ladies, Bless 'Em, A Mystery," 17 September 1964, Ibid.

endeavors but were focused solely on political concerns. Their teas were not social events; they were forums for candidates and local officials. When interviewed, Jean Ford explained their seriousness of purpose, stating that women joined the LWVLV because it was important work, not an excuse to get out of the house. Margaret Cahill remembered that the meetings were “all business” with little time for socializing.<sup>16</sup>

LWVLV prioritized work over social events. Ad hoc study groups tackling community interests consumed a great deal of time. Intensive research and white papers preceded publication of a formal position on any political or civic proposal. Items warranting active engagement entailed publicizing position papers, conducting letter writing campaigns, circulating petitions, and testifying before the state legislature if necessary. At least one member attended County Commission and City Council meetings to remain current about local events. Members served on civic boards and committees, ensuring their opportunity to help shape policy, such as local government consolidation, zoning, planning, and parks that affected the community. Dorothy Eisenberg recalled that it was crucial to study each topic thoroughly in order to effectively and intelligently lobby or testify before the state legislature.<sup>17</sup> As citizens of the community, they realized that all challenges facing the community were women’s issues from juvenile delinquency and school lunch programs, to national and local environmental matters.

In 1964, the environment was becoming a national concern, and the LWVLV participated in the conversation. Partnering with the local National Conference of Christians and Jews (NCC), AAUW, and the Community Drug Conference, they created

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<sup>16</sup> *Las Vegas Sun*, 21 May 1966, 24, JFC, box 24, folder 8. LWVLV Collection, box 4, folder 4.

<sup>17</sup> Dziedziak, *Eisenberg Oral History*, 44-46.

the film, *Cities are for People*, attacking urban pollution and linking it with human relationships. The documentary was televised followed by a panel of male experts who explained the dangers associated with pollution.<sup>18</sup> The LWVLV linked environment to community well being by working to preserve the Red Rock area and protect it from developers.

In 1964, Las Vegas suffered from a dearth of recreational facilities for families and youth. Recognizing the need, the LWVLV worked with the Bureau of Land Management in convincing state legislature to designate Red Rock as a state park instead of turning it over to developers. Following their usual methodology, the LWVLV first prepared and conducted a survey to gauge public interest in conserving Red Rock as a state park. The tabulated results proved a legitimate interest existed, especially among teens who complained that Las Vegas was an adult town with no recreational activities for youth.<sup>19</sup> Armed with the survey results and other studies by the LWVLV, League member and Nevada Assemblywoman, Flora Dungan, convinced the legislature to allocate enough funding to make Nevada eligible to receive matching funds from the federal government. The effort was instrumental in securing Red Rock and Spring Mountain Ranch as state parks. Subsequently, in 1967 they studied the need for municipal parks in Las Vegas and Clark County, and prepared a position paper that recommended forming a regional parks advisory committee. Their recommendation was not adopted. While their efforts were crucial to maintaining a thriving and healthy community, it paled in comparison to their involvement in the civil rights movement in Las Vegas.

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<sup>18</sup> JFC, box 1, folder 1

<sup>19</sup> JFC, box 4, folder 12.

The LWVLV began at the eruption of the civil rights movement, and the women tackled the debate head on. When racial tensions heated up, the LWVLV sponsored panels that fostered a community dialogue about racism. On February 24, 1965, they held public workshops and seminars that opened a public discourse about racism. One workshop entitled, "Implementation of Federal Programs to Ease Inequality in Employment," educated the public about the provisions of the 1964 Civil Rights, the relationship between juvenile delinquency and inequality in employment and education, the importance of federally-funded, anti-poverty programs, and the economic benefits to be derived from the Manpower Training and Development Act.<sup>20</sup> They were directly involved in the fight to integrate Clark County Schools and joined the NAACP lawsuit against the Clark County School District. They agreed with the NAACP's position that open housing, not busing, was the only solution to desegregation, but busing became the means for integrating schools.<sup>21</sup>

The LWVLV was the only group in this study that was racially diverse from its inception. Jean Ford affirmed that the LWVLV intended to be integrated from the start, and local African American civil rights activists were among the first members.<sup>22</sup> Local chapters of the League of Women Voters, especially in the South, were firmly committed to the Civil Rights Movement. The Raleigh, North Carolina chapter was the first to integrate in 1955, when, subsequent to the *Brown v Board* decision, African American, Vivian Irving, was admitted as a member. Despite the loss of some of the white members, Irving's membership was approved. The North Carolina League of Women

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<sup>20</sup> *Las Vegas Review Journal*, 24 December 24 1965, LWVLV Collection, box 8, folder 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, box 8, folder 3.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Ford History. [www.unr.edu/nwhp/bios/women/ford.htm](http://www.unr.edu/nwhp/bios/women/ford.htm) and [wrinunlv.org/research/our-history-profiles-of-nevada.../jean-ford](http://wrinunlv.org/research/our-history-profiles-of-nevada.../jean-ford), accessed 10 March 2012.

Voters challenged gerrymandering and supported prison reform. Chapters in Alabama and Louisiana also worked for integration.<sup>23</sup>

Thelma Toms, who had petitioned for a local chapter in Las Vegas, was a founding member and immediately headed the Human Resources Committee, a vehicle that provided a public forum for discussion of local racial discrimination. Through her committee, she addressed school integration, open housing, and welfare. The members from Las Vegas' African American community, known as West Las Vegas, rallied behind Toms' agenda. These women were dedicated to eliminating race discrimination and elevating the standard of living in West Las Vegas. Segregated by practice rather than by law, Las Vegas was known as "The Mississippi of the West" because of the Jim Crow practices and substandard living conditions that the City failed to remedy.

Racism in Las Vegas manifested itself in the form of job discrimination, beginning with the Hoover Dam Construction in the Thirties, hiring practices at Basic Magnesium during World War II, and the resort industry's limited employment opportunities from the Forties through the Sixties. Despite a large influx of African Americans who moved to Las Vegas seeking work, Las Vegas city fathers were not inclined to earmark funds to develop the West Side, leaving the community with inadequately paved roads, power service and plumbing, and substandard housing. Petitions to the Mayor for fire plugs, a sewer system and adequate public lighting fell on deaf ears, since the City Council did not see a financial value in investing in the West

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<sup>23</sup> Rod Clare. "Resisting 'the Doldrums': The League of Women Voters in North Carolina in the 1950s." *The North Carolina Historical Review*, 86 (April 2009), 180-204; Susan Ware, "American Women in the 1950s: Non Partisan Politics and Women's Politicization," in Louise A. Tilly and Patricia Gurin, eds. *Women, Politics and Change* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1990), 293. See also Rodney Clare, "The Activist Non-Partisan: The North Carolina League of Women Voters 1974-1979." (PhD diss. Duke University, 2001) and Debra Lynne Northart, "The League of Women Voters in Mississippi, The Civil Rights Years 1954-1964." (PhD diss., University of Mississippi, 1997). These works explore the League of Women Voters' support for the civil rights movement in the southern states.

Side. African Americans were not welcome on Fremont Street or in the Las Vegas Strip resorts during the Fifties and Sixties. Even major celebrities of the time, such as Nat King Cole, who performed in resort hotels were forced to reside on the West Side due to Jim Crow practices.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, leaders in the West Side aggressively pursued civil rights. For many African American women in Las Vegas, pursuit of civil rights included elevating women's status.

African American women have a long history of volunteer and benevolent organizations within their churches and communities.<sup>25</sup> In *Too Heavy a Load*, Deborah Gray White pointed out that African American women dealt with both racial and gender discrimination, a duality which frequently resulted in a push-pull between priorities. In the late nineteenth century, they understood the importance of elevating race as well as women's status, and the National Association for Colored Women took the initiative to lift the race and gender. They became subordinated to male-dominated race based groups such as Garveyism in the Twenties and the Civil Rights Movement in the Sixties. African American women in Las Vegas were no exception. Those who lived in Las Vegas' segregated Westside continued this tradition in the creation of their community and society.

African American women in Las Vegas during the Sixties pursued both civil rights and community uplift. West Las Vegas was a ghetto due to segregation, and the resort industry attracted a growing number of Africans Americans, most of whom were

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<sup>24</sup>Eugene Moehring and Michael S. Green, *Las Vegas: A Centennial History* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2005), 162-167, 196-204. Patricia Hershwitzky, *Images of America West Las Vegas* (Charleston: Arcadia Publishing, 2011), 28-29. These works describe municipal neglect of Las Vegas' West Side and racism in Las Vegas.

<sup>25</sup>Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *The Journal of Southern History* 56 (Feb. 1990): 3-22.

poorly educated, into low level positions such as janitors.<sup>26</sup> Housing restrictions and substandard schools and living conditions challenged aspirations for upward mobility. African American teachers, who were in daily contact with the neighborhood children in school and in the neighborhood, were especially aware of the need to find ways to encourage the youth and young girls.

In 1964, teacher Barbara Kirkland called together other women leaders in the community and started “Les Femmes Douze,” a program to reward young black girls for demonstrating and maintaining ladylike behavior and to encourage them to pursue higher education and career goals.<sup>27</sup> The girls had to demonstrate good citizenship and academics, do charitable works in the community, and raise funds for their Cotillion, the event that marked the successful completion of the program. At the formal ball, girls wore white gowns and were escorted by young men in full formal attire, complete with white gloves. During the year-long program, the girls learned how to prepare resumes and conduct themselves during job interviews. Scholarships were available to girls interested in advancing their education. The experience not only encouraged good citizenship, it instilled the skills and confidence necessary to survive and excel in the greater Las Vegas community and beyond. Kirkland also started a local chapter of the Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority in 1960 which became officially affiliated with the national sorority in 1965. In 1976, Thelma Toms organized a Las Vegas chapter of the Links, Inc., a philanthropic service organization for African Americans.

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<sup>26</sup>LWVLV Collection, box 1.

<sup>27</sup> Barbara Kirkland with Claytee White, 24 November 2004, unedited transcription. In the possession of Claytee White, Department of Special Collections, Lied Library, University of Nevada Las Vegas.

In addition to community service, African American women fought for civil rights in Las Vegas, mostly through membership in the local NAACP. When the LWVLV finally began, Thelma Toms and other women from the African Community joined as another avenue toward gaining civil rights.<sup>28</sup> The women were correct, as the LWVLV immediately participated in the fight for civil rights, in school integration, open housing, voter registration, and attempted to quell racial hostilities through public forums.<sup>29</sup>

As the LWVLV was battling for civil rights for African Americans, another movement was brewing, that directly affected all members. The ongoing quest women's legal equality was coming to a head. Fueled by the political climate that was created by the Civil Rights Movement, President Kennedy's Commission on the Status of Women, and Betty Freidan's book, *The Feminine Mystique*, women, especially those in the middle class, became more insistent in their demands for equality. The woman's liberation movement was born in the climate of protest, and the LWVLV soon became a leader in the fight. The LWVLV had conducted studies relative to working women in Nevada and the need for day care services. The results and recommendations were included Grant Sawyer's Governor's Commission on the Status of Women. As the LWVLV examined the array of state legislation and policies limiting women's status as full citizens, they moved beyond the LVBWP's interest in equality for working women. They adopted a much more feminist agenda, and demanded reproductive freedom for women through birth control, Planned Parenthood, and legalized abortions. Ultimately, the LWVLV

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<sup>28</sup> LWVLV Collection, box 1, folder 13. Helen Anderson, Margaret Crawford, Helen Crozier, Verlia Davis, Mabel Hoggard, Alice Key, Lavonne Lewis, Bernice Moten, Eva Simmons, and Thelma Toms appear on the membership list. Barbara Kirkland's name does not appear on the roster.

<sup>29</sup> 1968 Annual Report, Human Resources Committee, LWVLW Collection, box 8.



became a leader in the campaign to adopt the Equal Rights Amendment in Nevada.<sup>30</sup>

These conventional women who viewed League work as part of their function as women citizens now adopted feminism to gain full status as citizens. Many members continued to participate in public politics. Miriam Shearing became a Nevada Supreme Court Judge, while Jean Ford and Flora Dungan served in the Nevada State Legislature. Florence McClure started a rape crisis center, and Dorothy Eisenberg strongly opposed placing a nuclear waste repository near Las Vegas. Some women continued as feminine the feminist movement, like Millisor who went on to head the local chapter of the National Organization for Women.<sup>31</sup>

The women of the LWVLV did not abandon their role as wife and mother but as women citizens, they engaged in community projects for the public good and social justice. Their activism reflected their perception of themselves as women citizens. They focused their energies on issues that affected people's lives and social justice, and believed that government had a large role to play in human welfare. They ultimately included equal rights for women in their platform, and became a leader in advocating for passage of the ERA in Nevada.

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<sup>30</sup> LWVLV Collection, box 4, file 5. Dziejziak. "The Gendering of Nevada Politics: The ERA Ratification Campaign 1973-1981."

<sup>31</sup>Dziejziak, 73.

## Chapter 6

### Conclusion

According to the *Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, a citizen is an “inhabitant of a city or town” entitled to “rights and privileges of a freeman” and who also owes allegiance to the government. Citizenship encompasses the “quality” of an individual’s response to that membership.<sup>1</sup> Studies show that through history groups of citizens were often denied basic rights and privileges on the basis of race, sex, gender, sexuality, class and other factors.<sup>2</sup> For centuries, women were one of those groups. Throughout much of the twentieth century women, especially after marriage, existed in a citizenship netherworld because of their gender. They were expected to be loyal to the state, obey its laws and instill patriotism and civil values in their children but were excluded from the privileges of citizenship, specifically the right to vote, the right serve on juries, and the right to maintain control over their economic property. Women’s standing as independent citizens was compromised after marriage, when she was covered by her spouse’s legal status.

Through the lenses of class, ethnicity, race, gender, sexuality, and feminism historians illuminate ways in which women attempted to elevate their status and recognition as citizens. Much of the scholarship of women’s civic engagement in the twentieth century clusters around specific movements and time periods, including suffrage, progressive era movements, and later, the Women’s Liberation Movement. More recently, historians are examining women’s organizations during the Cold War period to understand how women functioned within their local communities. An interest

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<sup>1</sup>*Merriam Webster Collegiate Dictionary*, Eleventh Edition, (Merriam-Webster, Inc., Springfield, MA 2008).

<sup>2</sup>Linda Kerber, “Meanings of Citizenship,” 836-837.

in civic engagement and positions of right-wing, conservative women is also emerging. Women's organizations and civic and community involvement can be perceived as a function of a female expression of citizenship.

Exploring women's civic and charitable organizations through the lens of citizenship paints a broad spectrum of how their perceptions of their responsibilities as women dictated their involvement in public affairs and enforced their belief that they were vested members of American society who deserved independent and equal membership in state. Women exercised their civic obligations through gendered works that developed their communities and assisted citizens in need. While legally marginalized, they carved a feminized citizenship by tending to public health, human services, social justice, and charity. When identifying public welfare concerns as women's issues, women expanded their purview of home and family into the public arena, and often forced male politicians to consider legislation that would improve social conditions. The women knew that they lacked the legal rights that gave them a voice and visibility in controlling laws and policies and their rightful place as American citizens.

The members of the women's organizations profiled in this study strongly believed in their obligations as American citizens and participated in civic endeavors in ways consistent with their role as women. Through their work, they built and sustained community in Las Vegas. More importantly, they campaigned for legal, economic, and political equality. The women relied on traditional understandings when pursuing specific public improvements. Like many civic-minded women in the early twentieth century, the Mesquite Club were certain that their qualities of natural maternalism and superior morality gave them the mandate to tend to sanitation, community beautification,

education, and to improve social conditions affecting home and family. They sought independent status as citizens, and more economic control over their own financial assets. They lobbied for funding for widow's pensions and aid for mothers with children so that women could enjoy some economic freedom. From suffrage through the Cold War years, the Mesquite Club and the General Federation of Women's Clubs attempted to influence public policy through their role as guardians of home and family.

The Service League performed community service for public health, education, and welfare institutions and offered financial assistance to the needy. From their position as Las Vegas' "elite" citizens, they exhibited feminine charity in caring for the less fortunate. Through their work with local social service agencies, schools, and other charities, they served as a quasi-public agency, bridging the void created by government's refusal to adequately fund public assistance programs. While not politically active, they used their positions and influence to create mentorships and other programs for at-risk youth, to raise funds for services for the blind and handicapped children, and to support literary and educational programs and facilities. The Service League typically transferred projects which they initiated to the appropriate public agency, effectively forcing public funding for programs that otherwise would not have existed.

As more women sought higher education and entered the work force, they understood the importance of economic equality and independence. The LVBPW balanced their demand for workplace equality with notions of women's specialness. This organization supported the ERA while also arguing that women possessed special qualities that were necessary when creating policy, especially during Cold War politics.

They pursued equal pay and opportunities for advancement without challenging established feminine attitudes and behaviors. They participated in solving concerns identified as women's issues by supporting public health and public safety programs in the Las Vegas community. Beyond civic improvements, the LVBPW entered partisan politics, and actively solicited and encouraged women to run for elective office. The LVBPW educated and supported women in professional and political pursuits, enabling them to become a force for change. They held dual identities as competing in the man's business world and fulfilling their gender role. They demanded economic equality in the form of equal pay and opportunities in the work place while continuing to fight for an end to laws that denied women full rights as citizens. By the end of the Sixties, they led the Governor's Commission on the Status of Women, in which they recommended steps the state should take to include women in government and business.

Civic-minded women in post-war Las Vegas realized that educated voters produced a better and more transparent government. They also knew educating voters about the political process and candidates was a hallmark of the League of Women Voters. The women who initially attempted to start a Las Vegas branch of the League of Women Voters were motivated by a desire to benefit their families. By educating the general public, they hoped establish a more transparent government and dismantle the "good old boy" system of awarding public contracts that prevented other businessmen, like their own husbands, from competing for lucrative public works jobs. The LWVLV educated voters and supported public improvements and social justice in Las Vegas. Rather than relying solely on community largesse to remedy social ills, the LWVLV demanded government intervention and corrective legislation. Their position papers and

candidate forums made them influential in effecting changes in public policy and influencing public opinion. The LWVLV understood that government intervention was necessary to achieve social justice and equal rights, not just for African Americans, but for women. Eventually, they became a leading proponent for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment.

As seen in this analysis, women's affiliations in civic and community organizations gave them visibility and a voice in forging public policy. In the process, they built community and established a society. They did not challenge the family hierarchy or their role in it but adhered to gendered expectation of women's roles. Even working women stressed their special qualities as women to push their agenda. The women in each organization respected men as the head of the household and primary breadwinner and women as the helpmate and partner. By including traditional qualities of womanhood into public discourse, they affected public policy and forced government to pay attention to "women's issues" of health, education, and welfare. As greater numbers of women entered the workforce, they increased their pursuit of economic equality from changing legislation that denied women control over property and wages to demanding equal pay and career opportunities, a battle women are still fighting today.

Women's understanding of their role in the home and community was an expression of gendered citizenship that motivated them to create associations. Civic organizations gave women visibility and a collective voice that translated into a measure of political power. They knew their role as partners in the nuclear family and the community-at-large mattered and was important to the civic good, worthy of full citizenship status. When women joined forces to improve community, improve their

status in the workplace, or improve government, they did so from their identity as citizens and traditional women. Their claim for equal citizenship began with the birth of the nation and continues today as women continue to fight for legal, social, and economic equality. When historians examine varied spectrums of women's civic engagement and activism, it is important to consider those women who embraced traditional womanhood.

## APPENDIX

### ABBREVIATIONS TO FOOT NOTES

BPW-I	A History of Business and Professional Women, Volume I
BPW-II	A History of Business and Professional Women, Volume II
FJC	Florence and John Cahlan Papers
JFC	Jean Ford Collection
LVBWP	Las Vegas Federation of Business and Professional Women
LWVLV Collection	Records of the League of Women Voters of Las Vegas Valley
MCR	Mesquite Club Records
NvBPW	Nevada Federation of Business and Professional Women
SL	Service League [Las Vegas]



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