

LEAGUE MEMORIES from Charlotte Ward

I joined the Auburn LWV a few weeks after moving to Auburn in the fall of 1957, at the invitation of Anne Amacher, also a newly arrived faculty wife, whom I met at the Auburn University Newcomers Club. The Auburn League had been formed that spring by a group of politically conscious members of the Women's Club. Two women of my parents' generation, Florence Spencer and Florence Showalter, were my inspiration.

Mrs. Spencer was a Lee county native and wife of a local businessman. They were a rarity in those days: Republicans.

Mrs. Showalter was, as I recall, a New Englander by birth who had come to Auburn when her husband accepted a faculty position in the Auburn University English Department. When she arrived, Auburn had few paved streets and was indeed still a village. She told me she cried for the first month she was here.

By the time I arrived, they were community matriarchs, beloved and respected by many.

In those days, League program was built around two focal points: CAs, or current agenda items, chosen then as now by vote in state and national conventions, and CRs, or continuing responsibilities, former study items kept on the back burner for action as needed. One of our study items in 1957 was tax structure. The national League's position was that there should be unified budgets at all levels, with little or no earmarking. I learned quickly why in Alabama this was a bad idea. Now, nearly 60 years later, it is still necessary to protect schools via a separate education budget!

The LWWUS in those days paid more attention to international affairs and the UN than it does now. Mary Anne Breyer, another English faculty wife, was our extremely knowledgeable international affairs expert.

Anne Amacher soon became interested in local water quality issues. She attended all Water Board meetings and, in her wonderful Southern lady-like way, terrorized the members into making the right decisions for the next fifty years.

In the early sixties, the civil rights movement was heating up, but the LWWUS, always a conservative body in the sense that it does not rush into taking stands, but insists on thorough study, was very hesitant about jumping into the civil rights battle. In 1962, I had just been elected president of the Auburn League and was to be one of its delegates to the national convention in Pittsburgh. The recommended study item to be adopted was "A Study of the structure of the United States Senate" or words to that effect, the aim being to examine the committee system and the filibuster. At the first session, however, a caucus was announced for those interested in presenting a civil rights item as our principal CA. I went. I met with a small group of women from states across the country who felt that the League needed to get into this

fight. We mounted a campaign, complete with party hats. Someone found red cellophane firemen's hats at a nearby novelty store, and we wore them, proclaiming that when the city is on fire is no time to debate redecorating the firehouse! I became the spokeswoman for the group, because I was the only member with a genuine southern accent, which I could thicken as needed. To make a long story short, we won, with the adoption of the League's first Human Resources study. (Note for the future: the senate still needs work!)

This was also the time that school integration issues were arising in Alabama. The state constitution at that time had no explicit requirement for the funding of public schools. There was a strong movement in the state government to simply close all public schools rather than integrate them. The State League was hesitant to act, since there was no explicit position on the books. Emily Haynsworth, an Auburn math professor and a very distinguished scholar in her field, and I, now an assistant professor of physics, were sent to a workshop in Washington (on foreign affairs, I think) with the mission of finding out how far we could go, based on League principles and national positions, in supporting integrated public schools. I heard later that odds were being laid on whether these two ivory tower types would find their way back home.

We came back with a tentative authorization to act, and the Auburn League did so at once. I think we were the first organization in the state to speak out publicly on the necessity of keeping the public schools open, and open to every Alabama child, red, yellow, black, white, or polka-dot! Our membership soared to over 100. Apparently a lot of people were just waiting for someone to speak up. The State League quickly joined the fight. We were a small voice, but I think we made a difference. No schools were closed, and in most places, integration proceeded relatively smoothly. The die-hards opened "Academies."

In the early sixties, there were strong Leagues from the Gulf to the Tennessee Valley: Mobile, Baldwin County, Montgomery, Tuscaloosa, Auburn, Birmingham, Anniston, Gadsden, Morgan County, and Huntsville. The coastal Leagues did excellent work in studies of environmental problems in their area, and have consistently updated them and lobbied for preservation of coastal ecosystems.

Every League took seriously its duty to provide opportunities for voter registration, even when each worker had to be deputized by the probate judge to do the job. Sylvia Goldmann of Auburn, who served several years on the Lee County Board of Registrars, made it her business to see that someone went to every high school in Lee County in the spring to register seniors who had turned eighteen.

After the Voting Rights Act passed, Auburn Leaguers went to rural schools and churches with voting machines, courtesy of the local moving company that stored the machines between elections, and taught newly registered voters how to operate them. Some Auburn fraternities provided "chaperones" as we went into remote areas in the days before cell phones, just in case the ladies got in trouble!

Leaguers volunteered to help new voters at elections, when people who could barely read and write needed help in reading the ballots. They were, of course, honor-bound not to influence how the ballots were marked.

Nearly every League regularly provided, and still provides, candidate forums at the state and local level.

Sadly, as the founders of some of the early Alabama leagues died or moved away, the North Alabama leagues faded away. The trend today seems to be to join special interest groups to accomplish short term goals, rather than commit to a multi-purpose organization like the LWV, but I believe the League still serves a critically important purpose, and we may even be getting a better hearing now than we did in our early days. I'm glad for the opportunity to share these memories with a new generation of Leaguers.