

LWV History – 1920s

The decade of the Roaring 1920s was one of economic growth and social change. People were more mobile and had more money to spend. Communications, transportation, and consumerism grew tremendously. Millions of women went to work, and populations shifted from farms to towns and cities. US foreign policy was dominated by isolationism, the anti-Communist red scare, and immigration quotas, and conflicts grew between conservative and progressive viewpoints.

In addition, the United States Constitution was amended twice – once to restrict rights by prohibiting the sale of alcohol and once to expand rights – at least for some women – by prohibiting states from denying the right to vote based on a person's sex.

And of course, the League of Women Voters was founded in Chicago, one hundred years ago today, on February 14, 1920. PAUSE.

Back then, Leagues were organized by congressional districts and quickly spread. By 1924, there were League chapters in 346 of 433 congressional districts, with South Bend being in the 13th District which, by the way, does not exist anymore.

We know from news accounts that the South Bend League was formed on March 8, 1920 and became part of the women's club culture which flourished in South Bend. While our research has not shown whether women of color were members of the early South Bend League, our

best guess is no, although women of color did participate in separate women's clubs such as the prestigious St. Pierre Ruffin Club and in women's political party organizations for women of color.

Not surprisingly, League meetings and programming focused on the work of the League and also included a prominent social element. Meetings and programs often revolved around teas and luncheons at The Oliver Hotel or Robertson's Tea Room, often with entertainment and/or community singing.

The local League was built by women whose names were often seen on the society page and whose family names were prominent in business and industry – Studebaker, Carlisle, Elbel, Bronson, and O'Brien to name a few.

Although we do not have a copy of the League's constitution, we know from a 1921 news account that the two stated purposes of the local League were:

First - To foster education of all women in citizenship and to support improved legislation and

Second - To- express our citizenship by bending our efforts toward community service, community betterment and law enforcement.

By the fall of 1920, the South Bend League had organized itself, planning a program that took the League through May of the following year, including a two-day Citizenship school in September. It elected Anne Studebaker Carlisle as its first president, put together a board of seven officers and six directors, selected seven ward chairman, and set up three committees.

The Citizenship School was an important local event that included afternoon programs at the Oliver Hotel plus presentations each evening

by prominent women of the Chicago Democratic and Republican parties. The speakers outlined their party principals and argued passionately that the newly enfranchised women should join their party. These presentations made sense in 1920, when women were deciding for the first time where they stood on the political spectrum.

The League's program year ran from September to May, and it held both a business meeting and a program each month. The programs typically consisted of talks on civic and social issues, followed by discussion.

Speakers often traveled from other cities, and in March of 1921, National League president Maud Wood Park visited South Bend to speak at the League's first annual luncheon. The event was attended by about 245 members and guests and was definitely front-page news.

In its second year, League membership grew to 500 members, and the League planned another ambitious year of programming, again with monthly business meetings and programs on a wide array of civic and social topics.

These programs became very popular, and were attended by both women and men. In fact, so many men were attending, that the League opened honorary memberships to men "upon application."

Also, in its second year, the League assumed responsibility for the South Bend Symphony, which was just in its very earliest years at the time. The move was a nod to the League's organizational skill and was anticipated to put the orchestra on sound financial footing.

During the decade, the League was served by four presidents – In addition to Anne Studebaker Carlisle, who served 4 years, Rosa Brown Fickenscher served 4 years, Sylvia Kreider Neff, who was well known as a prominent golfer, served one year, and Mrs. Emmett S. Webster also served for a year.

Although we don't have membership numbers for the rest of the 1920s, we know from newspaper articles that the League continued to thrive, meeting regularly and planning programs throughout the decade.

By Geri Pawelski