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Memoir Project - Personal

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### My Life in League

I had a vague impression of the League as women who were interested in government or current events, much older and bossier than me--the stereotype of "club women" seen in New Yorker cartoons. And of course, there was my mother-in-law, who was serving as president of Missouri Federated Women's Clubs and traveled giving speeches to women's groups. Not anything I aspired to do.

My new neighbor came over the day after we moved in to invite me to a meeting. She said the unit met in the neighborhood and would be a good way to get acquainted and find out about Roseville. I was immediately impressed. These were women talking about things other than children and housekeeping, and they knew what they were talking about. They all had looseleaf notebooks full of newspaper clippings and spoke about facts and opinions. (I remember a remark heard much later that League in those days was like the Masters Degree you didn't have time for!) Even though I was shy in groups then, I did say something at that first meeting because I remember being complimented about participating. I had no idea this organization was to be part of my life for the next 50 years.

All these interesting women were ready to share their ideas about current events in serious discussion, and no one got angry. The firm non-partisan policy let everyone concentrate on facts and solutions. League program was extensive, so there were always a number of topics to choose from. I found members could answer any question that had to do with government activities! I soon found that League participation meant men looked at you differently in conversation-- you could supply the actual facts they were referring to vaguely. I appreciated that meetings were run efficiently and set up with babysitting so it was possible for all of us to participate.

I made a lot of use of the babysitting, especially when I served as president. My youngest was under four during that time. She began objecting to going to all the meetings and wanting to stay home more. I was feeling guilty until the day one of the older children was home from school (but not really very sick) and I told Sarah she could stay home with Caren. Instantly she declared she wanted to go, and I realized all this was just a ploy to see what she might be offered for cooperation. At least once she was part of a demonstration at the Capitol. Her best friend from next door went, too, I had signs for them that said "LWV in training" and "we will not give up." I'm not sure what the issue was--perhaps Party Designation.

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Th publications that came with membership were impressive, both in quality and quantity. [When I became local president, the out-going leader asked if my husband would be home when she came over to transfer the files. I was puzzled until she explained that the "files" included storage units. I had been thinking in terms of a small box, but it was a three drawer metal cabinet and a wardrobe-sized unit with shelves, locking doors, and more drawers! These had to be muscled down the basement stairs with the help of both our husbands.] There were things like stacks of booklets about the UN, supplies of publications on issues available to distribute to the public, copies of reports, annual meeting minutes, etc. etc. It had been the practice to carry a cloth display unit to each League meeting whose pockets were stocked with current publications to borrow or buy. By the next turnover of leadership, Georgeanne Hall and I slashed ruthlessly.

In our newly established neighborhood, everyone was close in age so the children had lots of friends close by. Very few families had two cars then, so it was helpful to be able to walk to friends. Most of us had 2 or 3 children young enough to be home most of the day. Only a few women were employed even part-time; most of us were home all day. There were lots of coffee parties among close neighbors where the moms talked and the kids played. I remember deciding that the best housing for families in Minnesota with little kids was really something like the Thatcher Hall student housing on the St. Paul campus. A large apartment building allowed moms to get together without having to struggle the kids into snowsuits!

There have been a lot of changes. Just the process of voting has changed several times. Working as an election judge was a natural outgrowth of League membership. When I first got involved, we used large index cards to track registered voters. Name, address, and signature were on the card with a record of their voting. There was a date for each election and a space for their signature when they received a ballot. So you could see how regularly they actually voted. Political parties were allowed to compile voter lists from the cards, which were color-coded pink and blue for women and men. Married people were filed together of course, since no women used a different name. For a long time we used giant voting "machines" which were really voting booths (with actual curtains) with small physical levers by each candidate's name and then a really large lever that would lock in the choices. Write-ins were actually written on a huge roll of brown paper in the back of the machine by sliding open a small window. I began to really appreciate our process after talking to a neighbor who had been living in Mississippi. She told me their rules meant you had to be a resident for two years and then be recommended by a minister in order to register.

When League gave testimony to the Village Council in Roseville, we went to a small, always dark room that was part of the old Fire Station garage. I remember one of our members being distressed after presenting a League position statement and answering objections from the grey-haired men who had been councilmen forever. She said she could have said more, but found her training as a nurse taught to be

differential to doctors turned on and interfered. One of the issues League worked on successfully was putting a term limit in place, rather than allowing automatic reappointments for everything. (When one of the long-term councilmen resigned in protest, the first woman ever appointed filled his position--June Demos, who later became mayor).

Besides the opportunity for general community service, League was one place available for activist women who wanted to work on useful and important issues. Political parties were welcoming at the office work / hostess level, but were not really interested in a woman's views. "Chairwomen" were usually wives of chairmen. I discovered that League groups were often active in towns where one party dominated as a means for the minority to be heard. League provided training in parliamentary procedure to help women be more effective. Our own annual meetings were very formal and there were lengthy debates about by-laws, often because the dues were in the bylaws (beginning at \$3.00) Most of this was basically practice to learn how to keep from being shut out in male-dominated groups. Making an impact on local government was the most practical place for an activist to begin. One of Roseville's administrators once told me that he had been warned about the League in classes on city government administration. But he said, he had found us very reasonable, responsible, and easy to work with! I told him maybe it was the other way around.

It was a different world then. People married young because pregnancy was a major catastrophe if you were not "legal." There was a time when we were not so different from the Middle East countries that require men for everything. Unmarried women needed a father or brother to contract for property, like a car or an apartment lease. Women were important in a very limited space. Imperfect methods of birth control, as well as the emphasis on family, gave most women plenty to do at home. Credit cards were in husbands' names, and you used your "married" name everywhere except as a signature on legal documents. Even in the 70s we knew working women who gave their paychecks to their husband and were given a small allowance in return. The plaque on the wall in the state League office with the names of members who received the Hope Washburn Award, for outstanding service to the state, lists "Mrs. John Jones" until after 1972 when "voting names" were used. There were adjustments to the way the non-partisan policy was interpreted at the local level. When I first became a member, a husband's activities were considered the same as his wife's. My neighbor was considered ineligible for a board position because her husband was running for the school board. It didn't matter that School Board candidates were not endorsed by parties or labeled. I found this really unfair, since my husband and I supported different parties. I argued that very few people paid any attention to politics this closely (we knew that!) and the ones that did, knew who was active anyway. No one ever questioned the fairness of our forum presentations.

Of course, the service-oriented League was a source of knowledgeable volunteers who could be called on to do lots of helpful things. We served as hostesses, in costume no less, at the City Hall Bicentennial

celebration, for example. [I wore a dress made for a square-dance club event--it looked sort of historical .] We could be relied upon to volunteer for committees and to help inform the public. Georgeanne Hall, the League president, and I, as past president, met with a group of business leaders to work on passing the bond issue for a new City Hall. A previous try had recently gone down to overwhelming defeat. All they knew was it would take money, which they were ready to supply, but they came to the meeting with few ideas. (We decided they were all used to assistants or secretaries making out their agendas.) We volunteered the League to do the literature drop (and take the money they would have paid a firm) and organized meetings in homes to show slides of the facilities that were a problem. Some of the men did act as speakers, too, but we set up most of the meetings spots around Roseville, We enlisted our kids to help with putting brochures in homeowners' hands.

It is now much more difficult for League to impact the system. We have since had the Women's Movement, the pill and the Sexual Revolution, the Equal Rights efforts and the economic changes that make two incomes required for middle-class families. It's not easy but it is now possible for women to go beyond what was once seen as their limits. As possibilities expanded, the eager pool of volunteers diminished. At the same time, the overwhelming importance of money in politics blew up to undreamed of power. Most recently, the political parties have divided so completely that there is almost no center where compromise happens. Ideology trumps even facts and certainly concern for the country as a whole. This is where the League has always worked. Now although the positions and policies of the League have not changed, they are seen as closely aligned with one of the parties. We have had candidates refuse to participate in public meetings because they view us as too sympathetic to their opponents. Prospective members may accept this view as well and conclude we aren't for them. It's sad.

I have learned so much through the LWV. I gravitated to working on program presentation because I liked learning new things. Some really stayed with me. I remember doing the abortion topic because it was considered a difficult one for "the League approach." We had been living in Britain when they legalized abortion and I had followed that debate closely. The thing I remembered being surprised about by the League study was learning that the first restrictions had nothing to do with morality but money. The doctors were losing patients to midwives who were willing to treat "delayed menstruation." So the doctors (male of course) made it illegal. The church was not concerned until after about the 4th month, which was considered the "ensoulment" point.

I was always big on visual aids. When we studied the Presidency, I made a display of political cartoons--my hand drawn-copies, before either copy machines or worries about copyrights. I found there was actually a lot of opportunity for other forms of creativity as well as drawing facility. There was the famous Chicken costume which we used in multiple parades. [**\*\*picture**] The idea came from a note in the State Voter with a picture of a costume another League was using with the "if you don't vote..." tag. I thought it was a good idea but a lame costume (they had a kind of furry suit.) I do think our oval cloth "feathers" were an improvement. The other big effort was turning a VW bug into a float for the Roseville parade by

pinning napkins to a cloth cover. Green napkins were the "LWV" on the background of white ones. My oldest (and smallest) daughter rode on top, waving.

There was a lot of help with both state and national program preparation in the past. The state organized Fall and Spring workshops which always had a program component. Those involved in program responsibilities could get together with their questions, be given added material, and suggestions for presenting studies. Minneapolis also had a large number of units and arranged Briefing Meetings for their program leaders to which nearby Leagues were always invited. I remember some very "high-powered" speakers--from the Pentagon and the State Department--when we were working on a National Defense topic. We learned about the latest weapons on order and terms like "throw weights".

Following the three years as Roseville president, I went on the state Board as Field Service Chair (later called "Service to Local Leagues") This was a time-consuming but really fun job. I have a copy of my annual report which records the amazing amount of year's work. There was a staff person at the state office who was assigned to focus on the local Leagues, with whom I worked closely. The famous Peggy Thompson read all the board minutes and newsletters of every League and alerted board members about problems. She also worked with local groups who showed interest in starting a League in their town. (At that time each State Board member not only provided monthly direction and advice to their local counterparts, but was also assigned several Leagues for whom they were "consultants"--available for general advice and encouragement.) It was a Board decision that year that not only should the board members as consultants be sure to contact their assigned groups, Field Service should visit them all in person. So Peggy and I traveled all over the state. We had a number of memorable trips, especially trying to follow directions in towns with few street signs.( We were once lost trying to "turn at the lion" and later found the statue was now covered by shrubbery but "everybody" knew where it was.) We also worked together organizing workshops and the state conventions. Peggy was extremely efficient but impatient with people who weren't. Some members avoided her because she could be irritable, but she had a great sense of humor, loved to party, and had a memorable laugh. On overnight stays, she always traveled with a bottle of Canadian whiskey in her suitcase. She firmly believed Council and Convention included evening party times.

There were amazing changes that all seemed to come at the same time. Sally Sawyer was hired and began her long and distinguished tenure running the office and representing the League. What stands out unforgettably for me is the advent of Maryanne McCoy as state president. When I first came on the board, Irene Janski was president. She was a formidable woman, firmly in charge. She was close to my stereotype of a "club woman" --rimless glasses, "mature" figure, dresses, shoes like my grandmother wore. We went strictly by parliamentary procedure, everyone paid attention, and knitting was forbidden, even in long meetings. Mary Anne was just as in charge, very energetic, but a style more different is hard to imagine. She was always interested in theater (she said she never watched soap opera on TV because she was

afraid of getting hooked watching the acting.) The part that was unforgettable was her first appearance at the convention where she took over as state president. She came out wearing the very latest fashion--hot pants!

My first National Convention, that celebrated 50 years of LWV, was unforgettable. It was exciting to see that you were part of an important , national organization! I ran into a college sorority sister I hadn't seen for years while waiting to get in, Washington, DC was beautiful, and the historic sites we had time for were impressive. But that year was full of special happenings It was in the middle of the Vietnam War. That particular week the media exploded as it was revealed that Nixon had ordered a secret bombing of Cambodia, and that members of the National Guard, supposedly keeping order on a college campus, had shot and killed four student demonstrators. The Convention voted to adjourn temporarily and went as a body to demonstrate at the Capitol--this had never been done before . A few of the anti-war congressmen came out and talked to us on the Capital steps. [\*\*pictures]

We heard reports from Leagues all over the country. I remember one comment from a delegate after hearing about the amazing number of League activities: "It's a good thing we have the League, or we would all be waxing our driveways!" The student speaker featured was also very impressive. She was a recent graduate who later became very well-known--Hillary Rodham. The Minnesota delegates arranged to meet with one of our Senators, Eugene McCarthy, who was thought to be considering a Presidential try. We asked him if he was planning to run again. He smiled guardedly and just said,"It's a nice address!" I traveled back and forth with League presidents from New Brighton and Falcon Heights. We sat together on the plane and talked. As we deplaned, the stewardess came up to us and said she had seen people who talked a lot , but never who were so excited and talked without pause the WHOLE WAY!

When I returned home, I found the house spotless and was told that all five children had cooperated to keep everything running perfectly. My astonishment diminished somewhat when I learned my husband had used enormous bribes quite successfully.

I also attended the National convention that celebrated the 75th Anniversary of the League as part of the state board delegation. [See published report.]

My next time on the State Board I was VOTER editor. I enjoyed the people I worked with, and was willing to do anything for Sally Sawyer. My first task was to prepare a report for the company that had provided the grant for a seminar. There was a taped speech and some minutes! The people who had attended were unavailable. And then there was the first issue of the newsletter, where a delegate had submitted her report in verse form. Sally threw up her hands and said, "Make something out of this!" The only worse experience came later, after Judy Rosenblatt and I had worked for months? on a history of the state

League--going through years of Board minutes (some were seven pages long) as well as every other bit of historical paperwork we could find, then written and re-written. We turned over the final copy to the new editor --who then proceeded to just drop out of sight. We never heard any real explanation about what happened. I assumed there was some scandal involved. A better experience was working with a St. Olaf faculty member on part two of the LWV publication: Financing State Government. We met in coffee shops half way to Northfield to go through line by line for the final publication. I also designed a bunch of brochures, which got good grades from the professionals that came in later to advise us on PR.

League has added so much to my life, I feel sorry for those who have never been involved. The women I have met and worked with have been varied and wonderful. From Virginia Spurrier who controlled communication when I first joined --as secretary, Voter editor, keeper of the mimeograph machine--and who many avoided, fearing an angry put-down of some kind, to the multi-talented crowds of members who would have gone to the top of any organization lucky enough to include them, I have enjoyed them all. Virginia was nice to me because I had clear handwriting and good punctuation. I found out after a while that she lived first with a husband and then with a son who both had a terrible genetic disease that gradually disabled and then killed. Slowed my judgement reactions ever after. There were lots of leaders that made people say, "She could run General Motors any day!" as well as "The whole room just changes when she comes in." Our League has been blessed with a really great group who have continued on. By now some of us have our little ways that everyone adjusts to and we get the jobs we are familiar with.

The real purpose of this organization doesn't change. We seem to be needed more than ever. It was in a workshop on membership at a state convention long ago that the leader asked how the group understood the reason they kept working. One woman stood up and with an almost embarrassed expression, said forcefully, "I always think we are saving democracy!"