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The League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha, 1920-1995

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**THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF GREATER OMAHA
1920-1995**

A THESIS
PRESENTED TO THE
DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY
AND THE
FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE COLLEGE
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE
MASTER OF ARTS
UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA AT OMAHA

BY
DEBORAH C. O'DONNELL
DECEMBER, 1996

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THESIS ACCEPTANCE

Accepted for the faculty of the Graduate College,
University of Nebraska, in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree Master of Arts, University of
Nebraska at Omaha.

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ABSTRACT

Most people know the League of Women Voters for its election-related activities; however, the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha is also a recognized force in shaping public policy and in promoting citizen participation at all levels of government. In addition to voter registration activities and preparing voters' guides, League members also study important civic issues and give the public the information they need in deciding questions requiring potential political action.

Six months before the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, the National League of Woman Voters was launched as an independent organization. The Omaha League was formed six months later in August, 1920. From the beginning, the League of Women Voters served primarily as a voters' organization and secondarily as a women's organization.

Since 1920 the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha has pursued the same general objectives, changing and adapting its action according to the needs and demands of the times. As the late twentieth century brought great changes in women's activities, particularly in the workplace, the League has supported these efforts and changed its structure and procedures.

Despite the significance of the Omaha League, there has never been a history written on this organization. This thesis, prepared to mark the Seventy-fifth anniversary of the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha, is a general history of the organization from its roots in the suffrage movement to the issues facing it today.

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INTRODUCTION

From the faith of the suffrage movement came a great idea, the idea that a nonpartisan organization could provide political education and experience which would contribute to the growth of the citizen and thus assure the success of democracy. The League of Women Voters was founded upon that idea.

National League of Women Voters, 1945.

Since 1920, the year women secured their right to vote, the League of Women Voters has encouraged the informed and active participation of citizens in government. The idea for the League began at the fiftieth anniversary convention of the National American Woman's Suffrage Association (NAWSA) in 1919 and was first proposed by NAWSA President Carrie Chapman Catt. That same year Catt accurately predicted that the League of Women Voters would come to be known as an "anomaly" in American politics. While relating this anomaly, Catt described the League as a "semi-political body." "We want political things; we want legislation; we are going to educate for citizenship . . . we have got to be non-partisan and all partisan."¹

Seventy-five years later, the League of Women Voters is still an anomaly in American politics. It is nonpartisan

¹ Forty Years of a Great Idea, published by the National League of Women Voters, 1960; Nancy M. Neuman, The League of Women Voters: In Perspective (Washington, D.C., League of Women Voters of the United States, 1994), 4-10.

and political. It educates and advocates. Its members are women, but the League describes itself as a citizens' organization, not as a feminist organization. It trains leaders; however, it cannot support them if they run for public office.

Most people know the League for its election-related activities. In addition to providing voter registration opportunities, League members also supply the electorate with information about candidates and issues. This is often accomplished through "Voters Guides" and public forums and debates. The more time-consuming responsibilities of the League membership are to study issues and reach consensus on questions of potential political action, and to monitor meetings of government agencies and elective bodies. Through these activities the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha is a recognized force in shaping public policy and in promoting citizen participation at all levels of government.

This thesis, prepared to mark the Seventy-fifth anniversary of the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha, is a general history of the organization from its roots in the suffrage movement to the issues facing it today. The author is undertaking this project because there has never been a history written on this local organization and it is one whose impact has affected generations of Omahans.

The thesis is not a history of the Nebraska League of

Women Voters, the National League, nor the National Suffrage Association; there have already been histories written on these organizations. However, any story about the Omaha League necessarily mentions these three organizations because the Omaha League grew from them. Nor is this a history of all of the League programs, though much information about the programs is contained in it. Because the story is of the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha as a whole, it is for the most part concerned with the most celebrated and significant programs undertaken by the local league.

History can be told through biographies, and the author will review League history by telling the story of a few individuals who have helped make the League what it is. But the League is dotted with the work of so many great women that it would not be possible to mention all of the individuals who have made contributions. However, the oral histories of local league presidents and other members will be used to provide perspective and fill in gaps in written sources.

Since 1920 the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha has pursued the same general objectives, changing and adapting its action according to the needs and demands of the times. The author will illustrate the Omaha League's relationship to significant advances made by women in general. This thesis will also note the impact of the

League on the local community and will demonstrate the relationship between the LWVGO and the state and national organizations. The history will be divided into four chapters to chronicle the high points of the organization.

Chapter one will begin in the 1920s with the formation of the national, state and local Leagues of Women Voters. Since the League grew out of the suffrage movement, this subject will be addressed by looking at the movement nationally and in Nebraska. This discussion will be followed by a look at issues facing women immediately following their achievement of voting rights. The formation of the Omaha League will be the focal point of this chapter highlighting the forces that were at the forefront of the movement. This chapter will answer questions such as why was the League necessary? When and how was the League formed? Who made up the League? What issues were important in the early years?

Chapter two will define the League's activities through the 1930s and 1940s. What was the impact of the Depression and World War II on League activities? What were the issues facing the League during these decades? What were the League's accomplishments during these formative years? This chapter will also analyze the League's internal changes that were initiated during this period.

Following World War II and into the radical 1960s, women's roles were changing and expanding. Chapter three

will introduce some of these changes in women's roles and parallel these activities with the League's own endeavors. Specifically, this chapter will explore the League's stand on the ERA and how it changed over time. The 1950s and 1960s were also a time when League members took it upon themselves to seek solutions to many community problems. The Omaha City Charter, urban renewal and fair housing, trash and garbage disposal and a new library are some of the local concerns. This chapter will discuss the issues the League studied and the reforms that came about.

The final chapter will highlight the activities of the LWVGO of the last twenty-five years and demonstrate how the League has remained true to its basic purposes, even though the programs and priorities have changed over the years. The League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha continues to be a unique, nonpartisan organization that is a recognized force in shaping public policy and in promoting citizen participation at all levels of government, and this role will be the focal point of this paper's conclusion.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my appreciation to the thousands of women that have made up the League of Women Voters and have inspired me through their good works and their arduous efforts. If I have any regrets in writing about the League, it is that I fear I will not be able to satisfactorily articulate the importance of this organization throughout the last 75 years of its existence.

Our daily lives are affected by the good work that these individuals carry out. At election time, they are invaluable. They are the only unbiased source the voter has as a reference to make his/her decision before casting a ballot. These women devote many hours of time each week to insure that we have as efficient a governmental system as is possible and that we wisely select our elected officials, regardless of their political party.

The LWVGO has also remained our political conscience for seventy-five years, taking on issues of racial equality, equal opportunity, environmental concerns, rights for women and children, and other social questions with vigor. Yet, amidst all that enthusiasm, is a professional, unbiased, and thorough analysis of every situation that is undertaken.

I would like to thank the Greater Omaha League of Women Voters for their support of my research. Most importantly I want to thank Barba Edwards, (president 1995), for her

patience and assistance throughout this long process. Barba provided me with access to individuals and research records and gave me the idea for writing this history in celebration of the League's seventy-fifth anniversary. For all of her help, I am truly grateful. I also wish to thank Deborah Suttle who first piqued my interest in the League and invited me to become a member. My sincere appreciation also goes out to all the League members that responded to my questionnaires or that allowed me to interview them during my research.

I am equally grateful to my academic advisors. First and foremost I wish to say thank you to Dr. Harl Dalstrom, who so graciously guided me and edited me through the process of writing. I am deeply indebted to him for his instructional advice and encouragement. Additionally, I wish to extend my appreciation to Dr. Jody Carrigan and Dr. Bernard Kolasa for their suggestions and comments regarding this work. I am also sincerely thankful for all of the support I have received from former professors in the UNO Department of History (including Dr. Dalstrom and Dr. Carrigan) throughout my entire professional and academic career.

My eternal gratitude also goes to my parents Jim and Rose Ann O'Donnell, my family, and my friend, Tom Arndorfer, who encouraged and supported my efforts every step of the way.

CHAPTER I

FORMATION OF THE OMAHA LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS, THE 1920S

One can not talk about the beginnings of the League of Women Voters without discussing the suffrage movement which began decades earlier. In Omaha, the women's suffrage movement began as early as one year after Omaha City was incorporated. The call came in January of 1856 when Mrs. Amelia Bloomer of Council Bluffs, Iowa, spoke to the Nebraska Legislature at Omaha, urging that women be given the right to vote. Her invitation came from General William Larimer, J. Sterling Morton and John M. Thayer.¹ At this time, Mrs. Bloomer was considered to be a prominent lecturer on temperance and woman's rights and "probably the best woman editor and publisher of a paper for women."² She was invited to speak to an audience that agreed with her regarding property rights for women; however, most doubted that woman suffrage was a good policy.³ During that legislative session, Bloomer certainly aroused an interest in her listeners. The scene was one of:

Men. Everywhere. Sitting on benches,

¹ H.W. Becker, "History in Photos," Sun Newspapers, November 1979 (clipping file), Historical Society of Douglas County, Omaha. Hereafter cited as HSDC.

² "Women for Whom Bloomers Named Made Talks Here," Omaha World-Herald, (undated article, clipping file), HSDC.

³ Louise Noun, "Amelia Bloomer, A Biography: Part II," The Annals of Iowa, 47 (Spring, 1985): 587.

standing between the seated, leaning against the walls. Hardly able to make her way through the crowd, the small, auburn-haired young lady took her place on the speaker's platform. She spoke simply, yet eloquently. After an hour and a half of attentive silence, the audience broke into great applause.⁴

Inspired by Bloomer's presentation, General William Larimer introduced a woman's suffrage bill during that same legislative session and on January 25, 1856 the Territorial House passed this woman suffrage bill by a vote of 14 to 11.⁵ In the Council (upper house), however, the bill was referred to a committee for study. A majority of the committee members reported in favor of the bill but the minority made no recommendation. A more urgent matter, that of settling county boundaries, held the attention of the Council until the end of the forty-day legislative session. As a result, the Council ran out of time and the bill failed to reach a final vote.⁶

"I was assured by Governor Richardson and others," wrote Mrs. Bloomer in her journal, "that the bill would undoubtedly have passed had a little more time been allowed them." Had it passed, Nebraskans would have been the first

⁴ Ann L. Wiegman Wilhite, "Sixty-Five Years Till Victory," Nebraska History Magazine, 49 (Summer 1968): 149.

⁵ Sun Newspapers, November 1979 (clipping file), HSDC; Wilhite, "Sixty-Five Years," 150.

⁶ O.A. Abbott, "Susan B. Anthony's Visit and Legislation," Nebraska History Magazine, 6 (July-September 1928): 149.

American jurisdiction to enfranchise women.⁷

Suffrage would become an issue before the Nebraska Legislature four more times before the Nineteenth Amendment to the Federal Constitution was passed.

In 1871, following a Nebraska constitutional convention, state legislators presented to the electorate a new state constitution and five proposed amendments to the constitution, one of which included woman's suffrage. While the members of the convention debated for days the issue of including suffrage, they finally reached a compromise by letting the voters decide the issue.⁸ The convention submitted the following amendment:

The legislature may extend by law the right of suffrage to persons not herein enumerated, but no such law shall be in force until the same shall have been submitted to a vote of the people at a general election, and approved by a majority of all the votes cast on that question at such election.⁹

The new constitution and all five amendments were proposed at a time when the electorate was unhappy with the state of affairs of the government. Two months before, the Governor of Nebraska was expelled from office for his poor

⁷ Wilhite, "Sixty-Five Years," 150.

⁸ James C. Olson, History of Nebraska, second edition (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 178-182; Robert D. Miewald and Peter J. Longo, The Nebraska State Constitution, A Reference Guide (Westport, Connecticut, Greenwood Press, 1993), 9-14.

⁹ Miewald, The Nebraska State Constitution, 9-14; Abbott, "Susan B. Anthony's Visit and Legislation," 149.

handling of state business--and the voters had not forgotten. There was a disapproving attitude toward state politics in general and voting rights for women was also a controversial topic. At the 1871 election the suffrage amendment received 3,502 votes for and 12,668 against. The suffrage amendment received the same fate as the rest of the package of constitutional amendments that were voted on and defeated.¹⁰

In 1882, a suffrage amendment was again presented to the Nebraska electorate and 25,756 voters voted for suffrage while 50,693 were against. Even though it failed again, momentum for passage was steadily building.¹¹

By 1914, when amendment discussions surfaced once more, the vote for suffrage in Nebraska came closer to passage. A state-wide campaign of great energy preceded the campaign on both sides.

During the 1914 campaigns, the anti-suffragists were well financed and received backing from the Omaha Daily Bee and the Omaha World-Herald. These newspapers often printed news articles that raised fear in their readers. One such article, appearing on November 2, 1914, appealed to Catholics and others to vote against the amendment because

¹⁰ Miewald, The Nebraska State Constitution, 9-14; Olson, History of Nebraska, 178-182.

¹¹ Olson, History of Nebraska, 178-182.

backing it were "Socialists" and "feminists."¹² Also during the campaign, a committee of businessmen was formed by the brewing interests which visited the husbands of various women working for the amendment. They argued that suffrage would mean prohibition and threatened their husbands' businesses unless their wives gave up the campaign for suffrage.¹³

The suffrage proponents, on the other hand, received support from the Omaha Daily News which valiantly championed the amendment. Additional support came from the National American Suffrage Association which contributed \$4,000 to the Omaha suffrage campaign, and from local politicians such as Mayor Jim Dahlman. Dahlman believed that "laboring" women should have the right to make the rules that they live under; however, Dahlman also expressed some concern that giving women the vote could lead to prohibition.¹⁴ On election day, the Omaha suffragists took to the polls and stood all day handing slips to the voters calling attention to the ballot. The final votes were cast: 90,738 for suffrage and 100,842 against.¹⁵

¹² Omaha World-Herald, April 29, 1939 (clipping file), HSDC.

¹³ The History of Woman Suffrage, edited by Ida Husted Harper, 376 (clipping file), HSDC.

¹⁴ Orville D. Menard, Political Bossism in Mid-America: Tom Dennison's Omaha, 1900-1933 (Lanham, Md: University Press of America, 1989), 124.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 377; Abbott, "Susan B. Anthony's Visit," 149.

Woman suffrage was submitted to the voters of Nebraska for the last time in 1920, as one of forty-one amendments proposed by the Constitutional Convention of 1920, with each being voted on separately. Woman suffrage was eighteenth on the list. Before the voters of Nebraska could vote on the suffrage proposals, however, the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, granting full suffrage to women, was ratified by thirty-six states, Tennessee giving the necessary thirty-sixth ratification on August 18, 1920. (On August 2, 1919, Nebraska had become the fourteenth state to ratify it, the Legislature having accepted the amendment unanimously.)¹⁶ Therefore at the special election September 21, 1920, both men and women voted in separate ballot boxes on the adoption of women suffrage into the Nebraska Constitution. The proposal passed overwhelmingly as 65,483 votes were cast for the amendment while 15,416 votes were opposed. Surprisingly, 928 women voted against their right to be able to vote.¹⁷

Although this election showed that Nebraskans were ready for this change, according to some historians, suffrage was really only an affirmation of the already expanded role of women in their communities. Women had been active in politics for some time and according to newspaper

¹⁶ Ruth Godfrey Donovan, "The Nebraska League of Women Voters," Nebraska History, 52 (Fall 1971): 313.

¹⁷ Abbott, "Susan B. Anthony's Visit," 149.

accounts, had already changed the face of politics. Women added their feminine touch to the election process even without being able to vote. Instead of the back room politics that had predominated for so long, by the 1920s women were joining men at political dances, banquets and picnics. This was being referred to in newspapers as the "new style of politics" that would now include women.¹⁸

Nebraska's efforts to attain suffrage mirrored those of most states and followed the actions of the National American Women's Suffrage Association. The National American Women's Suffrage Association, which had been fighting for enfranchisement in the United States since 1869, had representation all across the country. While much of the success in 1920 can be attributed to their long hard fight for suffrage, some historians will argue that the outbreak of World War I, and the important role that women played during that War, had an even greater role in bringing about the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment.

During America's involvement in World War I, a shortage of labor became acute and was exacerbated by the conscription of several million young men into the War. War demands called for a strong volunteer force and many woman met this patriotic challenge. Many young women also joined

¹⁸ Thomas J. Morain, Prairie Grass Roots: An Iowa Small Town in the Early Twentieth Century (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1988), 85; The Omaha Daily Bee, August 3, 1920.

the Army Nurse Corps or the Red Cross, while older women organized Victory Gardens, helped with voluntary food rationing, and made bandages or clothing for soldiers.

Much of the labor demand was met by 1.5 million women entering the work force as factory workers, jobs previously left only for men. Some even took such traditional male roles as machinists or locomotive engineers.

While many of these women were forced to relinquish their jobs to returning veterans at war's end, the legacy was helpful to women's suffrage efforts. Seeing how critical women were to the wartime economy, President Woodrow Wilson, who had previously resisted women's suffrage, dropped his opposition and the Nineteenth Amendment passed Congress in 1920.¹⁹

Six months before the Nineteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution was ratified, the National League of Women Voters was launched as an independent organization. In 1919, anticipating the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment and the demise of suffrage organizations after the vote was won, Carrie Chapman Catt, then head of the national suffrage association, called for a new organization of women. Its founders hoped that the two million members of the National American Woman Suffrage Association would move into the

¹⁹ Beverly Beeton, Women Vote in the West: The Woman Suffrage Movement, 1869-1896 (New York, Garland Publishing, Inc., 1986), 157; David W. Noble, David A. Horowitz, Peter N. Carroll, Twentieth Century Limited: A History of Recent America (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 143-144.

League of Women Voters, which would ready them for an active political life and provide them with the machinery to achieve their goals.²⁰

In a speech to the National American Woman Suffrage Association, president Carrie Chapman Catt summoned women to "finish the fight" and "aid in the reconstruction of the nation." The fight to be finished was winning national suffrage and eliminating other forms of discrimination against women.²¹

Catt further defined her dream laying the groundwork for what the League would later become:

The League of Women Voters is not to dissolve any present organization but to unite all existing organizations of women who believe in its principles. It is not to create sex antagonism but to develop cooperation between men and women. It is not to lure women from partisanship but to combine them in an effort for legislation which will protect coming movements.²²

From the beginning, the League viewed itself primarily as a voters' organization and secondarily as a women's organization. In the early 1920s, the League was involved with some direct political action, supporting and opposing

²⁰ Judith Papachristou, Women Together: A History in Documents of the Women's Movement in the United States (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1976), 189.

²¹ Nancy M. Neuman, The League of Women Voters (Washington, D.C., League of Women Voters of the United States, 1994), 4.

²² "A Great Idea Through the Years: 1920-Present" (pamphlet published by the National League, 1984), LWVGO archives.

candidates in a few elections. However, it quickly came to be identified as a nonpartisan, educational, and reform organization. The League was a moderate group and renounced any intention of becoming a women's party. As Maude Wood Park, the League's president, said in 1924:

The League of Women Voters from the beginning has stood for step by step progress. It has chosen to be a middle of the road organization in which persons of widely differing political views might work out together a program of definite advance on which they could agree. It has not sought to lead a few women a long way quickly, but rather to lead many women a little way at a time. . . .²³

The League never became known as an agent of radical change, but instead served as an important school of politics for women. At a time when women were kept from good jobs, higher education, and politics, the League made it possible to become involved with public issues.²⁴

During the 1920s the League came to concentrate on three goals:

1. General social reform;
2. The elimination of state laws that discriminated against women;
3. The education of women to their responsibilities as citizens.²⁵

²³ Papachristou, Women Together, 122.

²⁴ Ibid., 213.

²⁵ Lois W. Banner, Women in Modern America: A Brief History (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), 132.

The League made considerable progress in accomplishing the first goal, that of providing reform. The League of Women Voters emerged during the progressive movement, and many of its leaders and early founders had embraced the spirit of reform. Even the League's first program agenda "caught up in one capacious bag most of these (progressive) reforms."²⁶ On the local, state, and national levels the League was successful in achieving municipal reform, conservation, tighter consumer laws, a Child Labor Amendment, and public support for indigent mothers. Historian Stanley Lemons applauded the League's activities. In his study of social feminism of the 1920s, Lemons argues that women's organizations, and particularly the League, were primarily responsible for whatever progressive impulse still existed in an essentially conservative decade.²⁷

State chapters worked alongside the National League to accomplish the second goal, that of legal reform. Working together they were able to decrease the number of discriminatory marriage and property laws on the books. They also successfully fought to rescind laws prohibiting women from serving on juries or holding office. Many of these latter laws had been passed by state legislatures

²⁶ Banner, Women in Modern America: A Brief History, 17; Robert Booth Fowler, Carrie Catt, Feminist Politician (Boston, Northeastern University Press, 1986), xvii.

²⁷ Banner, Women in Modern America: A Brief History, 132.

after ratification of the suffrage amendment.

Most successfully, the League accomplished its third goal of educating women. The League often served as a training ground for women and provided them with the necessary information to make informed decisions.

In spite of its reform accomplishments, the League was a moderate organization. It quickly became apparent to League members that they should focus on the education of women for responsible citizenship rather than try to mobilize women to reform the political system. As former suffragists who had expected the vote to produce a national reformation, League leaders were dismayed when the elections of the early 1920s revealed that the turnout of eligible women voters was light and that their voting patterns followed those of male voters. Moreover, the League retained only a small percentage of the NAWSA's sizable membership. When suffrage was passed, many women ended their participation, believing that the job was completed.

As a result, the League's emphasis on education took on conservative overtones. Instead of using education to inspire reforms as the suffragists had done, the League viewed education as a way to better understand issues. In most local Leagues, women met to study the problems of government in an objective manner. The League attempted, wrote one analyst, "to bring to politics the aloof

detachment of the scientific method."²⁸ This was true of Omaha's own League of Women Voters. During the 1920s Omaha League groups studied topics designated by the national office. According to Mrs. Florence Smith, one of the founding members of the League and former League president, topics of study included child welfare, efficiency in government, women in industry; social hygiene; uniform laws; legal status of women, education, and living costs. However, these were not the first tasks required of the initial Omaha League members.²⁹

The Omaha League was founded in the summer of 1920, shortly after the Nebraska State League was organized. Much of the groundwork was laid for the State League at the final convention of the Nebraska Women's Suffrage Association held in Omaha from June 13-15, 1920, exactly four months after the National League of Women Voters was founded. The Nebraska Women's Suffrage Association had been active for thirty-nine years and it was at this final meeting of the Association that the Nebraska League of Women Voters was born.³⁰

²⁸ Ibid., 133.

²⁹ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

³⁰ Florence Smith, "Early History of the League of Women Voters," unpublished manuscript, 1. (Smith's essay is specifically about the Nebraska League of Women Voters.) See also Intelligent Voter, 29 (April 1954): 3. (The Intelligent Voter is the League's state-wide publication.)

This historic closing convention of the Nebraska Woman Suffrage Association was held at the Blackstone Hotel. The Executive Board of the organization met on Sunday afternoon and gave its blessing to the new organization in the form of a motion--

Be it resolved whereas the women voters of Nebraska are desirous of uniting for the purpose of education for citizenship and in support of improved legislation, we therefore recommend that a new and independent society be formed to be known as the Nebraska League of Women Voters, auxiliary to the National League of Women Voters.³¹

The motion was passed and the board proceeded to frame a new constitution and by-laws for the new League.

The first official day of the Omaha convention, Monday, June 14, 1920, was attended by most of the board members of the newly formed National League of Women Voters. These women came to Omaha from the Republican Convention in Chicago where they had represented the issues of the League and they were traveling to the Democratic Convention in San Francisco for the same purpose. They were by coincidence in Omaha for the formation of Nebraska's new State league.

Therefore, on the first day of the conference, Mrs. Maude Wood Park, National League Chairman, spoke on the League of Women Voters, explaining its organization and the issues facing the League. Prior to becoming the first president of the National League, Park had steered the

³¹ Intelligent Voter, 29 (April 1954): 3; The Bee, June 21, 1920.

women's suffrage amendment through Congress in the last two years before ratification. She knew how to rally women to the cause.³² Her talk to the Nebraska suffragists was stirring and the remaining discussions during the Nebraska convention were devoted to forming a new State League.

It was reported that at the last session of the three-day conference:

the delegates were elated to hear that at the luncheon that noon Mrs. Edwards, National Treasurer, had secured pledges to the amount of \$1,240 for the support of the new Nebraska League. They expressed a note of sadness at the passing of the old Suffrage Association and a thrill of enthusiasm in undertaking the work of the new League. They adopted the resolutions proposed earlier by the executive board which formally ended the Suffrage Association.³³

The new Nebraska League adopted its constitution and by-laws, passed more resolutions expressing their plans and purposes, and elected their first slate of officers. Three of the thirteen new officers were from Omaha. The new State League also invited its membership to join the new program which it promoted as follows:

1. To provide loyal support of the National organization.
2. In our own Nebraska, training for citizenship and securing legislation of importance to women and children.
3. To encourage political activity among women.

³² Smith, "Early History," 1; "A Great Idea Through the Years," 1.

³³ Smith, "Early History," 2.

4. To cooperate with existing organizations.
5. This organization makes its bow to the public at its debut in Omaha, announcing itself as an organization for political education, its members as such taking no part in partisan politics but acting in the parties of their choice through the regular party organization.³⁴

While much of the groundwork was laid for the Omaha League during the last Nebraska Suffrage Convention, its official organization came to pass on August 16, 1920, following a meeting of the Council of the Nebraska League of Women Voters. According to the minutes of this meeting, "Immediately upon adjournment the out-of-town contingent was taken to the Athletic Club for luncheon . . . At 2:00 p.m. they met in the City Hall where the Omaha and Douglas County women were assembled for the purpose of organizing their respective Leagues."³⁵

Two days later the Omaha Bee reported on the plans for the first Omaha League of Women Voters meetings to be held in Omaha. "The first of a series of moonlight meetings in Omaha, under the auspices of the League, will be held next Monday on the lawn of Mr. and Mrs. Gunther, 320 North Fortieth Street. Mayor Edward Smith will speak on the 41 proposed [state] constitutional amendments."³⁶

³⁴ Ibid., 3.

³⁵ "Minutes of the Meeting of the Council of the Nebraska League of Women Voters," August 16, 1920, Nebraska State Historical Society archives, #MS651.

³⁶ The Omaha Daily Bee, August 18, 1920.

While the League had already opened a headquarters office at the Peoples Coal Company at 212 South Seventeenth Street, many of the officers hosted the initial Omaha League meetings. The initial officers were:

Mrs. Charles J. Hubbard, Chairman
 Mrs. A. G. Edwards, Vice Chairman
 Mrs. H. H. Baldrige, Secretary
 Mrs. D. G. Craighead, Treasurer
 Mrs. E. W. Gunter
 Mrs. Charles Johannes
 Mrs. Halleck Rose
 Mrs. J. M. Metcalf
 Mrs. H. E. Smart
 Mrs. L. B. Webster
 Mrs. E. A. Undland
 Miss Ruth Mills.³⁷

Membership in the League of Women Voters was open to any women who was interested and paid fifty cents for an active membership and \$1.00 for associate status. However, as a political reality, membership was often limited to those women who could afford paid help in their homes or had free time. Of the original slate of officers, most of the women were married to physicians, attorneys, or company presidents.³⁸

Founders of the Omaha League were often experienced in the field of politics. Because they had been members of the Suffrage association they knew their way around legislative halls and understood the intricacies of public affairs. Many had husbands involved in politics or related positions.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.; Polk's Omaha (Douglas County, Nebraska) City Directory, 1923.

Harriet Dahlman, the wife of Mayor James Dahlman, was one of the founding members of the Omaha League. Typical of a League member, she was well-educated and well-versed in politics.³⁹

Recruitment measures were targeted to attract the more prestigious and educated citizens in town. Minutes from the June 1921 meeting of the Nebraska League of Voters laid out recruitment plans for the local and state leagues to bring in more members. Their plans mentioned only to "interest university graduates in town . . . and the prominent women . . . and get them to sign their own names in a receipt book and pay the fee at once!"⁴⁰

While membership appeared to attract an exclusive group of women, many efforts were made to make the League's activities open to everyone. As already mentioned, the first task of the Omaha League was to win full enfranchisement for Nebraska women in the September 21 election, even though the National Amendment would be passed weeks prior to the Nebraska election. League efforts were directed to all Nebraska women. Throughout that summer, Omaha League members appeared before women's organizations, at fairs, rallies, and meetings of all kinds. However, the

³⁹ Harriet Dahlman was a graduate of Wellesley College. Menard, Political Bossism in Mid-America, 95-96.

⁴⁰ "Minutes of the Pre-Convention Meeting of the Nebraska League of Women Voters," June 6, 1921, Nebraska State Historical Society archives #MS651.

most effective method of raising awareness was by holding local meetings.⁴¹

Throughout that first summer, the Omaha League held a series of "moonlight" meetings to discuss the state constitutional amendments, with special emphasis on the suffrage amendment.⁴² The theory of the moonlight meetings was that small groups would meet in various parts of the city for the purpose of learning more about the constitutional amendments. "Large audiences were not the aim" according to Mrs. Charles Hubbard, local chairman, who said, "we are making the meetings accessible and numerous enough to give everyone in the city an opportunity to attend."⁴³

Mrs. Hubbard was true to her words. The League arranged meetings at the City Mission, at the local packing houses, and oftentimes at the YWCA, all with the purpose of having the "41 constitutional amendments clearly explained in order that the people may vote intelligently at the special election."⁴⁴ A different speaker was invited to

⁴¹ Donovan, "The Nebraska League," 11.

⁴² The Omaha Daily Bee, September 12, 1920. There were forty-one amendments to the state constitution that were up to the electorate to adopt or not adopt. These amendments were recommended by a constitutional convention and all were finally adopted by the electorate on September 21, 1920. See Olson, History of Nebraska, 274-276.

⁴³ Ibid., August 24, 1920.

⁴⁴ Ibid., September 12, 1920.

each of these meetings to discuss the constitutional amendments. Almost always the speakers were men. The speakers included Congressman A. W. Jefferies, attorney; Reverend L.B. Holsapple, Rector of St. Barnabus Episcopal Church; John Rin, attorney; J. H. Craddock, architect; H. H. Baldrige, lawyer; Eugene Blaser, lawyer; D. C. Patterson, lawyer; O. T. Eastman, Vice President, Merchants National Bank, and Mrs. H.C. Sumney, physician's wife.⁴⁵

The speakers often emphasized the need for registering before September 10 in order to be eligible to vote for the suffrage amendment at the special election on September 21, when the constitutional revisions would be submitted. "Even though the ratification by Tennessee holds, there are many other important matters to be determined at this special election" Mrs. Hubbard observed in a newspaper in late August.⁴⁶

When the final vote came in September 1920 all of the constitutional amendments were adopted. The suffrage amendment passed with a huge margin.⁴⁷ With much surprise, this news about the suffrage amendment did not necessarily bring the best of fortunes for the League of Women Voters. When the amendment was passed, many League women thought their work was done. "The amendment fight was won in a

⁴⁵ Ibid., August 18, 1920; Polk's City Directory, 1923.

⁴⁶ The Omaha Daily Bee, August 22, 1920.

⁴⁷ Abbott, "Susan B. Anthony's Visit," 149.

September 1920 special election, and interest in the Omaha League dwindled" according to Mrs. Florence Smith.⁴⁸

But one year later, new League president Mrs. H.J. Bailey raised membership back up again from a few members to 190 persons. Mrs. Bailey explained in a 1969 newspaper article that she set up an office in the YWCA where she "could nab women as they came in." According to Mrs. W. A. Shafer, one of the founding members of the League and later a League president, "what was difficult was to get ordinary people interested and informed. Women had never been interested in governing of the city and county."⁴⁹

One avenue for keeping members informed came from the state League. The officers of the Nebraska League found they needed some means of communication with members and from this came the League of Women Voters, Nebraska Bulletin, first published in June 1922. The name was changed in 1924 to the Intelligent Voter.⁵⁰ While this was a state-wide publication, it became a way for the Omaha League to communicate with its own members.

Throughout the 1920s Omaha League members studied topics of local concern as well as those designated by the national office. Mrs. Smith recalled that topics of study

⁴⁸ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Donovan, "The Nebraska League," 316.

included child welfare; efficiency in government; women in industry; social hygiene; uniform laws; legal status of women; education, and living costs.⁵¹

Many of these early efforts by the League were typical of volunteer women's associations at the time. According to historian Anne Firor Scott, members of women's organizations during the early twentieth century were the first to recognize and deal with the social problems of their time. These "municipal housekeeping" efforts were commonly referred to as an extension of women's work so as to downplay how active in the community women really were becoming.⁵²

In these early years the Omaha League also took on political activities. They were the first to send questionnaires to candidates for city offices. Meetings with candidates were common. The League also backed a move for a civic committee which would support and solicit men better qualified for public office.⁵³ Many of the activities which would be a hallmark of the League in coming years began in the early 1920s.

⁵¹ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁵² Ann Firor Scott, Natural Allies: Women's Associations in American History, (Urbana, IL., University of Illinois Press, 1991), 141-158.

⁵³ Omaha World-Herald, December 17, 1939 (clipping file), HSDC.

CHAPTER II

THE OMAHA LEAGUE DURING DEPRESSION AND WAR, 1930s-1940s

Many believed that the passage of the suffrage amendment was the beginning, not the end, of a period of progress and accomplishment for women. However, the struggle for the Nineteenth Amendment which had aroused women's interest and energy seemed forgotten in less than a decade. Americans in the late 1920s began tiring of reform causes and appeared more dazzled by prosperity and mass-produced consumer goods: automobiles, radios, washing machines, and electric kitchens.¹

This seeming indifference towards women's issues carried over to the League of Women Voters. By the 1930s, there were only about 100,000 members in the National League of Women Voters, far fewer than the two million claimed by the National American Woman Suffrage Association. According to Louise Young, author of a history of the National League, the years from 1924 through 1934 were difficult. Quoting then League President Belle Sherwin, these ten years were "years of political and educational experimentation and

¹ Lois W. Banner, Women in Modern America: A Brief History (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), 141.

continuous self questioning."²

Throughout the 1930s this apathy continued. Women were encouraged to stay home and give men badly needed jobs. A 1936 Gallup Poll indicated that "82 percent of the sample believed that women should not take jobs if their husbands were employed."³

This emphasis on women's role at home was not conducive to independent political activity for women during the early 1930s. However, as the depression wreaked havoc with individuals' lives, it brought with it a growing interest in social values. As a result, when women did organize for public interest concerns, their attention centered more on social welfare than feminist causes.

Following its cue from the rest of the nation, the National League of Women Voters immersed itself in issues of general social welfare. During the Roosevelt administration, the League was a major promoter of the Social Security Act of 1935 and of the Food, Drug, and Cosmetic Act of 1936. The League also worked with other organizations to improve public school education. However, one League issue stood out above all others during the

² Louise M. Young, In the Public Interest (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 81.

³ David W. Noble, David A. Horowitz, Peter N. Carroll, Twentieth Century Limited: A History of Recent America (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 248.

1930s.⁴

In 1934, when federal and state government agencies were hiring thousands of employees to administer the new social and economic laws, the League launched a nationwide campaign in support of the merit system for selecting government personnel. The National League believed it essential that government personnel be appointed on the basis of merit, without discrimination or partisan consideration.⁵

The National League's decision to work on the reform of the civil service system was initially launched to mobilize and unify the National League which had been going through troubled times as a result of the depression. The thirties had marked a low point in the League's life: the general economic collapse after 1929 had dried up most of its private sources of funds and the League lost thousands of members. Furthermore, the League seemed fragmented by its many departments and standing committees with no unifying issue to bring them all together.⁶

The merit system campaign was successful on all fronts. By the end of the decade, the National League was partly

⁴ Banner, Women in Modern America, 174.

⁵ A Great Idea Through the Years, 1920 to Present, published by the National League, 1984, 2; Young, In the Public Interest, 113.

⁶ Nancy M. Neuman, The League of Women Voters (Washington, D.C., League of Women Voters of the United States, 1994), 21; Young, In the Public Interest, 98.

responsible for the passage of state and national laws that extended the merit system within the civil service. Additionally, the League was working as a united entity once again.⁷

Much of the success of this campaign can be attributed to early realization by LWV members that no campaign would succeed without major public support. Therefore, early in its campaign, the National League launched its first major public relations effort. According to a League publication, "from 1934 through 1940 the League did more to create popular understanding and support for merit principles than had ever been done by a single organization."⁸ And due at least in part to League lobbying, legislation passed in 1938 and 1940 removed hundreds of federal jobs from the spoils system and placed them under Civil Service.⁹

Some believed that the League's involvement in the merit system debate and other social issues limited its activities on behalf of women. However, according to historian Nancy Neuman, the League would always define its purpose in social feminist terms. Neuman believes that unlike "equity feminists" who tend to view women as similar

⁷ Banner, Women in Modern America, 174; Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 21.

⁸ "Twenty-Five Years of a Great Idea" (published by the National League of Women Voters, 1946), 21-29, LVWGO archives.

⁹ "A Great Idea," 2.

to men, "social feminists" believe that women had a right to work and since working women were still responsible for home and family, they needed special treatment to put them on an equal footing with men. The National League took action on behalf of women with this "social feminist" belief guiding their work.¹⁰

By the end of the decade the National League had made several major steps to advance women's causes. In cooperation with several other women's organizations, the League successfully lobbied for the defeat of many state bills that prohibited married women, who were not heads of households, from being employed. Furthermore, the League opposed federal legislation that disallowed the employment of both husband and wife in the federal civil service. This legislation had resulted in the firing of many women employees. However, in keeping with the League's moderate stands on women's issues, the League's fight against the nepotism legislation for the federal civil service was based on its violation of the merit system of appointment, not that it discriminated against women. "We of the League are very much for the rights of women" wrote one leader, "but . . . we are not feminists primarily; we are citizens."¹¹

In Omaha, the local League members also fought hard to stay moderate in their feminist views. Throughout the 1930s

¹⁰ Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 9.

¹¹ Banner, Women in Modern America, 174.

the Omaha League was described as the organization that provided the "formal expression of women's intelligent interest in politics in government,"¹² but was never seen as an organization just to promote women's issues.

Many Omaha League members were women who were generously active in many fields of social and welfare work; however, these activities were seen merely as an extension of their domestic responsibilities. "Their concern lies first with the home, and they foster an alert interest in government because they know bad government harms the home and wasteful government steals from the wage earner supporting a home," according to a 1937 Omaha World-Herald article.¹³ Describing fellow members from the 1930s, Mrs. C. K. Ross, Omaha League president in 1938, contended that most of the members were women who were active in women's clubs. ". . . they have come to see how closely government taxes, relief administration and related public affairs effect their own homes and families. They have also reached the place where they want to do something actively."¹⁴

While League members were usually women who stayed at home and saw their club activities as an extension of their domestic roles, they still fought for the right of married

¹² Omaha World-Herald, November 10, 1937 (clipping file), Historical Society of Douglas County, Omaha. Hereafter cited as HSDC.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., February 20, 1938 (clipping file), HSDC.

women to work. In June 1937, it was reported that the Omaha League board unanimously voted to adopt a motion urging the repeal of a section of the 1932 Economy Act that discriminated against the employment of married women.¹⁵

The Omaha League mirrored the National League's agenda on many other issues as well. During 1936-37, an Omaha League program pamphlet supported such legislation as the short ballot, adequate state food and drug legislation, improved working conditions for women and opposition to discrimination in public employment based on sex or marital status. Also mirroring the National League, the Omaha League placed much emphasis on reforming the civil service system.¹⁶

When the call to action came from the National office to campaign in support of the merit system for selecting local government personnel, Omaha League members responded with fervor. The local campaign was kicked off in October 1935 when Mrs. George Gellhorn of St. Louis, national chairman of the League of Women Voters' campaign for the merit system, came to speak to the Omaha members:

We believe that Jackson's 'to the victor belong the spoils' must vanish. The man on the street thinks the spoils system is written into the constitution and that civil service consists of written examinations for

¹⁵ Ibid., June 3, 1937 (clipping file), HSDC.

¹⁶ "Historical Highlights," (notes on the League prepared by the Omaha League, 1967), Nebraska State Historical Society archives, #MS0307.

post office employees----both are fallacies. We believe that public opinion can be brought to bear against the existing system until party leaders are forced to divorce politics from administration, and public office-holders are obliged to meet definite requirements before they take over their duties.¹⁷

Mrs. Gellhorn rhetorically asked, "since we choose recruits for the army and navy after they have undergone a period of careful training, why not follow that method for our civil servants?"¹⁸

Omaha League members also received appeals from the State League to reform the merit system. An amusing article putting the issue in women's vocabulary appeared in the Intelligent Voter in April 1935. It read:

Every woman knows what a bad egg will do to a good cake. Yet we allow our government bakers to choose a fine recipe, then pick an unsavory nut for a chef who uses rancid grease, spices and peppers to deceive the taste, beats it full of wind to make it look acceptable. Then passes it quickly in the hope that no will stop to examine it carefully.¹⁹

The merit system debate in Nebraska received its greatest momentum in Omaha during 1937. Omaha League members took on both city and county government in its push for a merit system. In April of that year, League members prompted a public argument with Mayor Dan Butler.

¹⁷ Omaha World-Herald, October 10, 1935 (clipping file), HSDC.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The Intelligent Voter, 12 (April 1935): 2.

Attacking the League's condemnation of the "spoils system," Mayor Butler said the term was "too broad" and should be defined. "There is one spoils system that means that an office holder gives jobs to those who helped elect him," said the mayor. "Then there is another, that implies somebody is collecting graft. If there is any graft, I want to know about it. As far as the other kind of spoils system is concerned, I'd like to have my record looked up." Butler argued that when he succeeded Mayor Roy Towl, he kept the city clerk and his staff, the legal department, one of Towl's health commissioners, most of the health department staff, and the plumbing inspector. "I had plenty of applications for jobs and I might have replaced these people with my friends, but I found they were doing their jobs all right, so I thought they ought to stay."²⁰

League efforts for a merit system continued throughout the year. OLWV members, believing that the Douglas County Commission had brought the county to the verge of bankruptcy and was harming Omaha's reputation, joined the Omaha World-Herald in calling for the resignation of the five-member body. The League also called for reform in the method of electing new commissioners. At its November 1937 general monthly meeting, the OLWV passed the following resolution:

Therefore, be it resolved, that the Omaha League of Women Voters states its belief that

²⁰ Omaha World-Herald, April 28, 1937 (clipping file), HSDC.

citizens of this community want clean and efficient government, and offers its support to any group which will stand on the following items:

1. A merit system and trained personnel in administrative divisions of government.
2. Better election laws for the county commission, including the nomination and election at large instead of by districts and no bond issues for current expenses.
3. Be it further resolved that we support the demand of the World-Herald that the county commissioners immediately resign.²¹

Increasing emphasis on the need for improvements in local government continued through the 1930s. According to the World Herald, the merit issue brought the Omaha League "to the front among local civic organizations that have taken active leadership in civic affairs."²²

The Omaha League also was prominent during the 1930s for its efforts to create an adequate system for the administration of public health. These efforts were aimed at getting a city health department and later a Grade A Milk Sanitation Ordinance and were successful on both counts. According to an Omaha League member, this was also the first strictly local project for the Omaha League.²³

Studies dealing with relief issues and other social welfare causes also occupied the Omaha League during the

²¹ Ibid., November 9, 1937 (clipping file), HSDC.

²² Ibid., February 20, 1938 (clipping file), HSDC.

²³ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

depression years. During 1936 and 1937, a program pamphlet of the Omaha League recommended support for such legislation as improved working conditions for women, compulsory jury service for women and opposition to discrimination in public employment based on sex or marital status.²⁴

Public school financing, also an item of local study in the 1930s, brought the Omaha group a new member who would become the local president from 1937 to 1939. Through her own work with Parent-Teacher Associations, Mrs. C.K. Ross had become interested in the problem of the mill levy increases for public schools. She later recalled that she joined the League because " . . . it was necessary that we approach the legislature. I felt personally that I was so naive and unskilled in my relationship to people in government that I felt that this [the League's] basic kind of study interested me."²⁵

During her tenure as president, there was a struggle to keep the Omaha League alive. The depression and drought in the Midwest were contributing factors she later recalled, and were also spurs moving the League into studies of water conservation and sewers. "I was intrigued with the courage and optimism of women who got into the League at a time when there wasn't much basis for optimism." Mrs. Smith said. "I

²⁴ "Historical Highlights," 6.

²⁵ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

was graduated from high school in 1917--I remember emphasis was placed on making the world safe for democracy through our own self-fulfillment and participation in community affairs," she said of herself and League colleagues.²⁶

By the end of the 1930s the League had nearly 300 members and was entering a period of tremendous growth and change which would affect its structure, its means of conducting business, and its programs.

Like other local Leagues, the Omaha League had always been structured into six departments which met once a week. The areas of study included: 1. government and its operation; 2. government and education; 3. government and child welfare; 4. government and economic welfare; 5. government and legal status of women, and 6. government and foreign policy. By the early 1940s, however, it was becoming apparent that the system under which the League operated was not reaching all of the members effectively.²⁷ Each department covered its program thoroughly, but it made specialists of its members and they were not as informed as they should have been about the subjects of the other departments. This was changed in the 1940s when the League adopted a new set of rules to structure itself and determine its agendas.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Omaha World-Herald, December 17, 1939 (clipping file), HSDC.

During this same decade the League also changed its method of presenting material and of reaching decisions. Since the mid-forties, the present method of having members meet monthly in small groups to study, discuss and reach consensus has been in effect. After concerted attention is given to the selected programs, and when a consensus is reached and a position on the issue taken, a long continuous process of building support in the community for that position begins. League action may include testifying at public hearings, holding public forums, distributing publications, using mass media, and writing letters to and conversing with public officials. This work is done on a volunteer basis, dependant upon how much time each individual can share. Some OLWV members pay only their annual dues and are members mostly to support the League or receive their literature. Many of the members, however, are more actively involved and carry on the activities of the League. There has never been a paid staff member to assist with the activities of the OLWV.²⁸

Many of these changes came about during World War II. During the War, gasoline rationing curtailed travel. League members began meeting in neighborhood discussion groups, a format that encouraged members to express themselves and helped them connect with the organization. The unit meeting format became so popular the League institutionalized the

²⁸ "Historical Highlights," 7.

format in 1949.²⁹

The largest modification to the League structure also came during the World War II era. In 1946 the National League changed from a federation of state organizations to a national member-based organization. This action placed less emphasis and less reliance on the state leagues and put more emphasis on direct communication with its members. The League's 1946 convention attendees formally adopted this new structure and changed the National League of Women Voters to the League of Women Voters of the United States. State and local leagues followed suit. The Omaha League of Women Voters became the League of Women Voters of Omaha in 1946. (It changed again to the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha in 1986.)³⁰

The War impacted the League in many other ways as well. Nationally, it was a time when the League had to evaluate itself in terms of the current crisis. One month after the United States entered into World War II, the national League's Council declared:

The LWV recognizes that danger threatens our national existence as a self-governing free people. . . the Council moreover appreciates that even to have the opportunity to develop a democratic future the war itself has to be won. In this knowledge the League looks to itself and asks not just what it may do

²⁹ Betty Stevens, A Dangerous Class (Lincoln, Nebraska League of Women Voters, 1995), 57.

³⁰ Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 22-25; League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha Yearbooks, 1946-1996.

better or differently but asks whether it shall continue to exist. Has it a reason for being, sufficient to justify it in times when every non-essential commodity and activity is being sacrificed?³¹

This question was answered with an overwhelming "Yes." The leaders at the Council committed the League to reaching a larger public; to devising ways of seeing a Congress elected in 1942 which would be capable of dealing with the problems the country faced, and assisting the war efforts. The national League was also actively supporting price controls, rationing, higher income taxes, and other efforts to support the war cause.³²

While members of the Omaha League became members of the Canteen Corps, worked with the Red Cross rolling bandages and learned first aid, they also kept alive the work of the League of Women Voters of Omaha. Many Omaha League members distributed information on certain defense issues. Some of this information considered such subjects as "Why Buy Defense Bonds," and "Civilian Defense and Your State." Fliers on these subjects were issued by the national League for distribution in communities.³³

An article in the Intelligent Voter of February, 1942 stated:

³¹ Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 56.

³² Ibid.

³³ "Years of Crisis," (notes found on the Omaha League), LWVGO archives, 8.

Though the work of the League of Women Voters lacks the glamour of ambulance driving or of air raid observation, it is as essential as the other services which the women of the nation are offering to their country. The preservation of a democratic way of life through an informed and loyal citizenry makes for the same goal at home as that for which the soldiers are fighting abroad.³⁴

The local League also carried out the national League's efforts to get people elected who would be capable of dealing with wartime problems. In December, 1943, the Omaha League began a campaign to stimulate public interest in local elections and to encourage voter registration. The League issued 5,000 handbills listing pertinent election dates and urging every citizen to "worry and work for what you want."³⁵

Throughout the war years, the Omaha League lost some of its members to war-related activities. However, even with fewer members, the Omaha League's efforts still continued to address vital local issues that would help maintain a strong government.

During the mid-1940s the Omaha League of Women Voters gave primary attention to the following issues: tax bills; premarital and prenatal blood tests; licensing boarding homes for the aged; child labor issues; standardizing the

³⁴ The Intelligent Voter, 17 (February 1942): 2.

³⁵ Omaha World-Herald articles, "Only 3 Have Filed In County" and "Women Voter Leagues Lists 1944 Offices" (undated), (LWVGO Scrapbook, 1939-1959), LWVGO archives. Also see hand bill, "I Should Worry," LWVGO archives.

size of loaves of bread, and child adoption laws.³⁶

The Omaha League also avidly lobbied the State Legislature to pass LB 82, allowing jury duty for women.³⁷ Furthermore, when this same legislative bill became state law in the spring of 1943, the League continued to fight for its enforcement. The law permitted women to serve "where proper facilities are available" and required that there must be "separate restrooms for men and women." At the time, the Douglas county jury rooms had only one restroom. To correct the situation, the Omaha League lobbied the County board until restroom facilities were installed so the women of Douglas County could serve as jurors.³⁸

While the League took on many issues that were of importance to women, League members still maintained a moderate agenda and continued to oppose any strictly "feminist" issues. So when the issue of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) became national news in 1943, on the twenty-third anniversary of the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment, it is not surprising that the League opposed the amendment.³⁹

³⁶ Omaha World-Herald, February 3, 1943 (clipping file), HSDC.

³⁷ Ibid.; Nebraska Legislative Journal, 56th Session, 1943.

³⁸ Omaha World-Herald, July 1943 (undated), (LWVGO Scrapbook, 1939-1959), LWVGO archives.

³⁹ Ibid., August 27, 1943 (LWVGO Scrapbook, 1939-1959), LWVGO archives.

The ERA amendment received wide support from the National Women's Party, headed by Alice Paul. Paul referred to the passage of the amendment as the "unfinished business of the nation's women" and predicted that it would be passed as soon as Congress reconvened. In 1944, Paul rewrote the 1923 version of the amendment into the language that has been used throughout the decades. She patterned the wording from the Nineteenth Amendment. The 1944 version of the amendment read as follows:

1. Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex.
2. The Congress shall have the power to enforce, by appropriate legislation, the provisions of this article.
3. This amendment shall take effect two years after the date of ratification.⁴⁰

The League of Women Voters took a different stand. As represented by Marguerite Wells, president of the national League, the League issued a statement opposing passage of the amendment calling it "an unnecessary and frivolous demand" on a Congress concerned with War problems.⁴¹

While the war raged on, the national LWV was busy studying how an international organization might be formed to preserve the peace following War's end. Then in 1944-45,

⁴⁰ Changed Forever, published by the national League, 1984, 7-15.

⁴¹ Omaha World-Herald, August 27, 1943 (LWVGO Scrapbook, 1939-1959), LWVGO archives.

the Dumbarton Oaks proposals for the establishment of the United Nations became the focal point for the most vigorous citizen education effort ever undertaken by the League. The Omaha League worked closely with the national League to emphasize the need for establishing the United Nations and the importance of this country's membership in the organization. League members were eager to share information concerning this new organization to prevent future wars.⁴²

At the end of World War II the Omaha League members continued their activities to oversee local governmental operations. Their motto became: "let the people know, make the people care, help the people act."⁴³ Consistent with this goal of civic involvement, the LWVO voted to "study the city charter and Nebraska statutes governing counties as they affect revenue, public schools, health and recreational programs."⁴⁴ These were issues that would be raised many times in the following decades.

⁴² "A Great Idea," 3; Omaha World-Herald, December 2, 1949 (LWVGO Scrapbook, 1939-1959), LWVGO archives.

⁴³ Omaha World-Herald, November 21, 1948 (LWVGO Scrapbook, 1939-1959), LWVGO archives.

⁴⁴ "1946 Membership Roster, Bylaws and Programs," LWVGO archives.

CHAPTER III

THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS IN POST WAR AMERICA: 1950s-1960s

The post World War II period marked the largest membership growth in the League's history. In 1941, the National League membership stood at 50,000 and it hovered there throughout the War. But after the War, membership boomed. By 1946, the LWV had 62,000 members; ten years later, membership had more than doubled to 125,000 women.¹

Omaha's membership increases mirrored those of the National organization. According to Mrs. Florence Smith, former Omaha League president, "membership dipped during World War II and the Omaha League had only 25 dues paying members by 1950."² According to newspaper accounts, Omaha participated in the National membership campaign and the rolls grew to 101 members by 1953. By 1956, membership totals reached 193 in the Omaha League.³

During these postwar years, attitudes towards women's

¹ Nancy M. Neuman, The League of Women Voters (Washington, D.C., League of Women Voters of the United States, 1994), 30-33.

² Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), Historical Society of Douglas County. Hereafter cited as HSDC.

³ Ibid.; League of Women Voters Yearbook, 1956, LWVGO archives.

roles were shifting. Women's participation in the wartime work force had set an important precedent for female employment. Although many women would be replaced by returning veterans at war's end, the numbers of women in the workforce would increase sharply again in 1947 and return to the World War II levels by 1950. This trend continued into the next two decades.⁴

Also following war's end a new emphasis was placed on domesticity for women. In newspapers, magazines, and other mass media forms, "Rosie the Riveter" was replaced by the homemaker as the national model for women. Advertisers would often project either a housewife eager to buy the latest home products or a seductress whose appearance suggested special pleasure from the product she displayed. The baby boom following the war, with a fifty percent increase in the nation's birthrate, suggested that the advertising campaigns were successful.⁵

In the two decades following the Second World War, it was these two central yet conflicting trends that influenced women's lives:

⁴ Between 1940 and 1960, the number of women workers in the United States doubled. David W. Noble, David A. Horowitz, Peter N. Carroll, Twentieth Century Limited: A History of Recent America (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1980), 332-333.

⁵ Lois W. Banner, Women in Modern America: A Brief History (New York: Harcourt Brack Jovanovich, Inc., 1974), 215; Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Almanac of American History (Greenwich: Bison Books, 1983), 590.

1. Their expanded participation in the work force.
2. A resurging emphasis on domesticity and femininity as women's proper role.

According to historian Lois Banner, "the sizeable movement of women into the work force in the 1940s and 1950s gives the illusion of social change, but the reality for women was not very different from what it had always been." Thus, the feminists of the 1950s never really envisioned a very different future for themselves. They believed that women could achieve their goals of equality by making modifications to the existing social structure. Many argued that because there were major biological differences between men and women, they did not want to tamper with these arrangements. This was the belief of many women when the ERA again became an issue in the postwar period.

The ERA was supported by a variety of women's organizations including the Woman's Party, the National Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, and the National Federation of Women's Clubs. However, numerous organizations, including the League of Women Voters, still opposed it as being against the best interests of working women. League members early on opposed "any blanket legislation . . . to eliminate legal discrimination between men and women without setting up standards of the rights,

privileges, and duties which they might expect to enjoy."⁶

During this postwar period, the national League's involvement in women's issues was slim. Instead, much of its work emphasized the re-structuring of government. The League supported a 1945 reorganization act empowering the President to reorganize plans for federal departments and agencies, and a 1946 reorganization act strengthening the structure and procedures of Congress. And in order to develop public support for a stable fiscal policy, the 1948 League convention adopted a study of federal taxes and expenditures.⁷

Many internal structural changes in the National League also came about in this postwar period. As already noted in the previous chapter, in the 1940s the National League changed from a federation of state organizations to a National member-based organization. To build on this modification, in 1951 The National Voter was created to provide direct communication from the National LWV to all of its membership.⁸ Two years later the Omaha League began its own monthly newsletter, The Omaha Voter, as a local means of communicating with its individual members. (The

⁶ Intelligent Voter, 10 (November 1932): 3; Banner, Women in Modern America, 223-228; ERA Report, published by the national League, May 1981.

⁷ Louise M. Young, In the Public Interest (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 169.

⁸ Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 31.

Omaha Voter changed its name to the Bulletin and continues to be a monthly publication for Omaha League members.)

Additionally, in 1954, the National League changed the system under which the League had always been structured. It restructured its programs into categories, so that only a certain number of items could be worked on at a time. The system came to be best known for "CAs" (Current Agendas) and "CRs" (Continuing Responsibilities). CRs were positions that could not be modified without going through a complex process. CAs were the programs adopted at each membership convention.⁹

The same steps were followed on the local, state and national levels. Therefore, for a position to be taken on by the national League, it had to come from the membership.¹⁰ "All issues come from the bottom up, national can not tell us what we can and can not do--by way of study. Therefore, if our league is interested in a particular problem, we study it on a local level, and we then share with the state what we found -- they then decide whether they want to take that issue and broaden the scope to the rest of the state and whether they want to present

⁹ In League, Procedures Manual for the League of Women Voters, published by the national League, 1989.

¹⁰ This "CA" and "CR" system was abandoned in the 1970s. In League, 10-3; Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 32.

the issue to national."¹¹

To select a topic for discussion the following steps are followed: 1. Discussion and recommendations by the members; 2. Selection by the appropriate board of a proposed program based on those recommendations; 3. Consideration of the proposed program by the members; 4. Final adoption of a program by the members at the annual meeting.¹²

Once an item is selected to be studied, action on the item is taken only following considerable study and after the membership reached a consensus on the proposed action. The Education Fund (a separate fundraising arm of the League) is then used to pay for printing the League's research into a booklet format. The publication is a compilation of all of the League's findings. According to Deborah Suttle, "it has to show both sides of an issue . . . we have to show the public that we have looked at all sides of the issue."¹³

When the League (local, state, or national) arrived at a consensus position, a long continuous process of building support in the community for that position began. League

¹¹ Interview by author with Deborah Suttle, March 1, 1996.

¹² Over the years many procedural changes have been made in the way the League program is selected, defined, adopted and structured, but through all the changes the basic concept of study, member agreement, and then action, has remained constant. In League, 10-3.

¹³ Deborah Suttle Interview.

action might include testifying at public hearings, holding public forums, distributing publications, using mass media, and writing letters to and conversing with public officials. In seeking this support in the community the League promoted citizen understanding and political responsibility while also promoting the League's specific goals.

In looking at the CAs selected by the League of Women Voters of Omaha during the 1950s, it was obvious that one field of interest and study led into another:

- 1952 Trash and Garbage Disposal in the Omaha Area
- 1953 Trash and Garbage
- 1954 Omaha's Existing City Charter
- 1955 Various Forms of City Government with a View Toward Revision of Omaha's Charter
- 1956 Court Procedures, Laws and the Juvenile Offender
- 1957 Omaha City Government and New Charter
- 1958 1. Omaha under New (1956) City Charter
 2. Proposals for "Omaha Plan"
- 1959 Douglas County Government and Interrelationships with Omaha City Government¹⁴

In Omaha, the study of trash and garbage disposal occupied much of the League members' time during the early 1950s. This is an issue that began in the late 1940s by a committee chaired by Mrs. C.K. Ross. "We were so involved that some of the people opposed to land fills called me Mrs.

¹⁴ Membership Roster and Program, 1952, 1953, 1954, 1955, 1956, 1957, 1958, 1959; "Historical Highlights" (notes on the League prepared by the Omaha League, 1967), 6.

Trash and Garbage Ross."¹⁵

The League's concern about Omaha's trash and garbage problems initially arose from a study of the City Health Department. League members thoroughly studied all sides of the problem. Believing that the current system was "inadequate, extravagant and unsanitary," the League passed a resolution endorsing a mill levy to finance a joint trash and garbage collection in Omaha. This was defeated by the electorate in May, 1951. As a result, Omaha was left with no trash-hauling program, open and unsightly dumps, and a garbage-hauling contract which would expire at the end of the year.¹⁶

One month after the issue was defeated, the Omaha League voted to revive the issue. They believed they had offered Omaha a worthy plan; however, they expressed concern that it was not "sold properly." The League attempted to get the issue back on the ballot, this time by referendum.¹⁷

Throughout the next year, Omaha World-Herald articles reported on all the meetings and discussions organized to review this issue and inform the public. Films on land-fill methods were shown and designated speakers were brought in

¹⁵ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

¹⁶ Omaha World-Herald, April 6, 1951 (clipping file), HSDC.

¹⁷ Ibid., June 3, 1951 (clipping file), HSDC.

to discuss the topic.¹⁸

After thorough analysis of all disposal systems and costs, the League spearheaded the formation of the Mayor's Committee on Garbage and Rubbish. A mayoral appointee chaired the committee and the group received a great deal of publicity. However, even after the Omaha League finished its studies and generated great support for the landfill method of disposal, they were still defeated. Instead, Omahans selected the incinerator method of disposing of garbage.¹⁹

According to Mrs. Florence Smith, past League president, the League's position was proven correct in later years. In the 1960s Omaha began its switch to landfill when officials discovered that the incinerator could not handle the load and was too expensive to operate.²⁰

In spite of Omaha's slow response, many persons at the time recognized the League's efforts. In April, 1954, the LWVO was nominated for the 1953 Lane Bryant Group Award for the League's leadership and spirited campaign on the

¹⁸ Ibid., September 17, 1952; September 9, 1952, and numerous other articles (LWVGO Scrapbook, 1952-53), LWVGO archives; Omaha World-Herald, February 27, 1952 and June 3, 1951 (clipping file), HSDC.

¹⁹ Omaha World-Herald, March 15, 1953; September 17, 1952 (clipping file), HSDC.

²⁰ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

landfill method for garbage and trash disposal.²¹

Through the rest of the 1950s, much of the Omaha League's efforts were spent advocating modifications to the city's structure of government. League members were devoted to studying the city charter, backing the idea of a charter convention, and then supporting the document that resulted.²²

At the time of the Charter Convention, Omaha had what was known as the commission system, an innovation of government that was common in the early twentieth century. Under this commission form of government, seven city councilmen were elected for three-year terms. One of the seven was chosen to serve as mayor and the rest of the six councilmen headed the remaining administrative departments of the city. Consequently, with the commission form of government, the same individuals who served as councilmen to determine policy were also serving as department heads and responsible for implementing the policies.²³

It slowly became apparent that this form of city structure was severely flawed. Not only did the commission form of government combine the legislative and executive

²¹ "Historical Highlights," 7.

²² A Study of the Operations of City Government Under the 1956 Charter, published by the Omaha League, September 1964; Sun Newspaper, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

²³ Harl Dalstrom, A.V. Sorensen and the New Omaha (Omaha: Lamplighter Press, 1987), 24.

branches of government, but it often placed individuals as department heads who knew nothing of the departments they were running.

Following World War II, the issue worsened. As the city needed to begin extensive street repairs and undertake costly city improvements, five commissions were added to the structure of government to oversee these expenditures. This resulted in a "cumbersome structure with indefinite lines of authority between the elected commissioners and the appointed commissions."²⁴

Many believed that the confusion that was added with the appointment of the five additional commissions brought about an urgency to review the city's current system of government. However, this issue did not immediately seem necessary to the electorate. In 1950 a proposal to replace the commission with a city manager system was defeated by the electorate. It became obvious that reform was going to have to move slowly in order to receive support from the voters of Omaha.²⁵

Four years later, the League of Women Voters began to study the issue of the existing City Charter again. At the

²⁴ Ibid., 24; Janet Daly-Bednarek, The Changing Image of the City, Planning for Downtown Omaha, 1945-1973 (Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 108-122.

²⁵ Dalstrom, A.V. Sorensen and the New Omaha, 25; Harold T. Muir, "The Formation and Adoption of the 1956 Omaha Home Rule Charter 1954-1956" (Omaha: M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1969), 5-14.

same time, during the 1954 City Council elections, the issue moved to the forefront as many of the candidates advocated the Charter's revision during their election campaigns.

Shortly after the Spring elections, the League of Women Voters of Omaha pushed to allow the placing of a Charter Convention proposal on the August primary ballot. League members became active distributing material door-to-door and making speeches. The Commissioners supported this effort and the Charter Convention was approved by the voters on August 10, 1954.²⁶

Fifteen members were to be elected to the Convention to study the city government and propose changes. In the spring of 1956, the Convention delegate primary and run-off elections were held. Throughout these campaigns, the League of Women Voters studied various forms of city government, printed a pamphlet, and held a candidates' meeting a week before the voting.²⁷ The League did not back specific candidates. Instead, the Omaha League launched a three-phase program to acquaint Omaha voters with the City Charter Convention. The three phases were:

1. Inform the public of the basic facts pertaining to the convention;
2. Sponsor candidates' meetings to acquaint the public with the people who would comprise the convention;

²⁶ Dalstrom, A.V. Sorensen and the New Omaha, 25; A Study of Operations of City Government.

²⁷ Omaha World-Herald, May 6, 1956 (LWVGO scrapbook), LWVGO archives.

3. Keep the action of the convention before the public in so far as is possible.²⁸

The League also asked residents of Omaha to urge qualified citizens to file as delegates to the convention. During this time the League continued to study various forms of city government, printed pamphlets, held panel discussions and candidates' meetings. All of these League efforts were headed by Mrs. Fred Wupper, the League's voters' services chairman. The League followed through on all of its goals and effectively organized to keep the public informed throughout the entire Charter Convention.²⁹

Once the recommendations of the Charter Convention were completed, the task remained to get the voters to accept the plan. Al Sorensen, Chairman of the Charter Convention, devised a plan that involved business and community leaders throughout Omaha. His plan also called for a \$25,000 advertising campaign that utilized the services of Bozell and Jacobs advertising firm, and used a variety of media forms including newspaper, radio and television advertisements. Sorensen also enlisted support from a wide variety of community organizations including the League of Women Voters.³⁰

²⁸ North Omaha Booster, January 27, 1956 (clipping file), HSDC.

²⁹ Omaha World-Herald, May 6, 1956 (clipping file), HSDC.

³⁰ Muir, "The Formation and Adoption of the 1956 Omaha Home Rule Charter, 1954-1956," 136-176.

In September 1956, the League of Women Voters announced they would hold forty neighborhood coffees to sell the proposed new Charter. According to newspaper accounts, "League workers found neighborhood women eager for more knowledge. And they fielded many of the questions being raised by skeptics of the Omaha Plan."³¹ With help from the League of Women Voters of Omaha, the new Charter, with a strong Mayor-Council form of government, was adopted by the voters on November 6, 1956.³²

The issues remained important to the Omaha League members throughout the late 1950s. In 1958 when an effort was made to return the city to the commission form of government, the League continued work to retain the new form of government as prescribed by the new charter.³³

While all of this work to restructure Omaha's city government was underway, League members saw a need for an informative booklet on Omaha. Accordingly, League members spent considerable time in the early 1950s collecting and editing material for such a book. The initial Know Omaha book, published in 1953, included information that explained

³¹ Omaha World-Herald, September 13, 1956; October 12, 1956, LWVGO archives.

³² "The Home Rule Charter of the City of Omaha, 1956"; "Historical Highlights," 8; "A Study of the Operations of the City Government Under the 1956 City Charter"; Muir, "The Formation and Adoption of the 1956 Home Rule Charter," 175-176.

³³ Historical Highlights, 8; Dalstrom, A. V. Sorensen, 102.

the departments of city government, pointed out educational, industrial and recreational facilities, and advocated the League's positions on issues to promote growth and interest in the civic and cultural development of the city.³⁴

As a result of changes in city government in the 1950s, the book needed to be updated a few years later. This second Know Omaha publication was completed in March of 1960. The 1960 printing attained such popularity that over 2,000 advance copies were sold at fifty cents a piece.³⁵ Subsequent editions of the book were printed and the League still updates the work.³⁶

A great amount of effort is put into the production of the many League program publications and studies that are prepared each year. Committee members conduct extensive research on the given topic and prepare documents in such a way that they may be accurate, objective, and readable.

Once the publication or study is completed, the League often decides that it should be shared with the community.

³⁴ Sunday World-Herald, March 15, 1953 (LWVGO scrapbook, 1952-1953), LWVGO archives; Omaha World-Herald, March 10, 1960 (LWVGO scrapbook 1962-1965), LWVGO archives.

³⁵ Omaha World-Herald, March 10, 1960 (LWVGO scrapbook 1962-1965), LWVGO archives.

³⁶ Here's Omaha, A Guide to Local Government, published by the Omaha League, 1987. (This current publication serves as a guide to local government. It contains a brief history of Omaha, along with seventeen other diagrammed sections dealing with city departments, schools, public utilities, boards, commissions and authorities, courts, health and welfare and elections.)

Other organizations, firms, libraries, schools, community leaders, and sometimes political parties, often welcome League materials. Sometimes copies are given free of charge while others are sold. League publications and studies prepared during the 1950s include: "Omaha Douglas County Health Department," 1958; "Juvenile Court Study," 1956; and "Our Court System," 1952.

Throughout the 1950s, League of Women Voters members kept themselves educated on most civic matters and were dedicated to keeping the public informed as well. So when Betty Frieden published her writings about women of that decade, she had not taken into account the average member of the League of Women Voters.

In her book, The Feminine Mystique, Friedan argued that middle-class women required a sense of personal fulfillment to be truly satisfied. But League members of the 1950s did not fit Betty Friedan's portrayal of female desperation. According to feminist historian Susan Ware, League women did not suffer from a "terminal case of the feminine mystique." Ware argues that the League of Women Voters had always provided public roles for women denied access to the usual sources of power ". . . and they made these roles available on the local level, where women could most easily make political contributions without necessitating drastic changes in their familial

arrangements."³⁷ Ware also theorizes that the political training and the advocacy skills available to League members in the 1950s helped lay the groundwork for participation in the civil rights movements of the 1960s.³⁸

By the early 1960s, there were signs that the coming years would bring changes for women. In 1961 President John F. Kennedy created the Presidential Commission on the Status of Women, and many states followed his actions. Then in 1964, the establishment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, set up primarily to handle racial discrimination cases, brought to the forefront many complaints from women. However, it was soon discovered that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission was not taking women's grievances seriously.³⁹

As women awakened to society's many patterns of sexual discrimination, the League of Women Voters expressed little concern at the start. Coming from an era when advocacy on behalf of women's interests was considered selfish and unimportant, League members were not interested in working specifically for women's rights or being labeled as a "feminist" organization. This would change through the decade. By the end of the 1960s, the National League of

³⁷ Louise Tilly and Patricia Gurin, Women, Politics and Change (Russell Sage Foundation, New York, 1990), quoted in Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 34.

³⁸ Ibid., 35.

³⁹ Schlesinger, Almanac of American History, 590.

Women Voters of the United States had become much more sympathetic to the ERA.⁴⁰

The growing civil rights crisis of the 1960s also added a new awareness to the problems of this nation's communities and, in response, the League directed its energies to a campaign it called "equality of opportunity." At its 1964 convention, the national League adopted a national human resources program with an initial focus on education and employment. This program trickled down to the local Leagues which in the subsequent two years examined the problems of poverty, discrimination, unemployment, underemployment, and inequities in public school education. During the rest of the turbulent decade, the Omaha League, along with other Leagues across the country, built a foundation of support for equal access to education, employment, and housing.⁴¹

Throughout the 1960s, as many groups took to the streets, the League continued to use its tactics of persuasion and public education. But the effects of the 1960s activism permeated the League. During this time many members sought a more visible role for the organization in women's rights and the social movements of the times. Furthermore, the League suffered from internal divisions

⁴⁰ Young, In the Public Interest, 158; Neuman, League of Women Voters, 36; Interview by author with Barba Edwards, former League president, February 17, 1996.

⁴¹ A Great Idea Through the Years, 1920 to Present, published by the national League, 1984, 5.

over the Vietnam War. However, the national League and many local Leagues made tremendous progress by stressing "action" as the primary goal of their programs.⁴²

Across the country local Leagues spoke out on the need for fair housing and a greater housing supply for low-income families. Leagues also tackled the controversial issue of better racial balance in the schools. According to national League historian Louise Young, "much of the most influential action of the League occurred at the community level."⁴³ Because of the work done at the local level, the national League was able to provide valuable first-hand accounts at congressional hearings on the need for federal antipoverty programs.⁴⁴

The Omaha League did its share to support many of these efforts. The League's published agenda for the 1960s was as follows:

1960

1. Douglas County Government
2. Omaha's Sewer Systems

1961

1. Planning Needs of Omaha-Douglas County Area
2. Comparison of Combined Local Governments in Other Areas

1962

1. Urban Redevelopment and Renewal

1963

⁴² Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 37.

⁴³ Young, In the Public Interest, 155.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

1. Urban Renewal Programs and Evaluation of Same
2. Metropolitan-Regional Cooperation Activities and Needs in the Omaha Area.

1964

1. Urban Renewal, Support of Proposals for UR Authority
2. Omaha City Charter Review

1965

1. Urban Renewal Program Support
2. Omaha City Charter Review, Proposed Changes
3. Omaha Library Services and Needs

1966

1. Omaha City Charter Review, Support of Urgent Proposed Changes
2. Omaha Library Services and Needs, Evaluation of Main Library requisites

1967

1. Continued Support of Efforts to solve Metropolitan Problems on a regional basis and study of proposals for city-county cooperation.
2. Study of Capital Improvements Planning and Programming for the City of Omaha.

1968-1969

1. Evaluation of equality of opportunity for adequate housing in Omaha.
2. Support of efforts to solve metropolitan problems on a regional basis.
3. Support of plans for an adequate Library facility.
4. Support of a comprehensive urban renewal program.
5. Support of the proposed amendments to the City Charter classified "urgent" by the Charter Study Convention of 1965.⁴⁵

The Omaha League approached each agenda item with the goal of getting results, and the programs that were selected each year were implemented immediately. If a goal were not reached, the item remained on the agenda with a different

⁴⁵ Membership Roster and Program, 1960, 1961, 1962, 1963, 1964, 1965, 1966, 1967, 1968, 1969.

approach in the following years.

Early in the decade, Omaha League members took on county government and the city's sewer system, successfully initiating improvements to both. A partial solution to the sewer problem came about with the affirmative votes on bond issues in 1958, 1960 and 1962. League members went into action on these proposals with flyer campaigns and speaker's bureaus. Additionally, due in part to the Omaha League support, voters in 1960 passed a constitutional amendment creating a juvenile court system.⁴⁶

From a series of League studies that followed in the early 1960s came a consensus which resulted in the League's support of efforts to solve metropolitan problems of governmental and economic cooperation on a regional basis. As a result, from 1962 to 1966 the "Continuing Responsibility" item, "Support of Area Land Use Planning for the Omaha Metroplex," was kept on the League program. Under this position the League urged approval of the "Future Land Use Plan" which was ultimately adopted. It supported the adoption of "Omaha's Master Plan" and urged development of planning and zoning activity for Douglas County. In 1965 the Douglas County Commissioners adopted a zoning ordinance for the county. Following this action, Omaha adopted an additional zoning class, designed to control zoning in flood

⁴⁶ Our Court System, published by the Omaha League, 1952-53; Juvenile Court, published by the Omaha League, 1956-57; "Historical Highlights," 6-8.

plain areas within the city's jurisdiction.⁴⁷

Following on the heels of these League studies, came further research into the City Charter. As in the 1950s, the League remained a major player in guiding the city's structural growth.

Omaha's 1956 Home Rule Charter provided a structural framework that would help the city meet its changing needs. Section 8.15 stipulated that "within 10 years after the adoption of this charter . . . the council shall provide by ordinance for the creation of a Charter Study Convention to be appointed by the Mayor . . . Such Charter Study Convention shall review the operation of the government under this charter, as amended, and shall make such recommendations as it may deem appropriate to the Mayor, the Council and the people. . ." ⁴⁸

In 1964, the League began reviewing the operations of the city government in preparation for the ten-year review. The League believed that "in order to give serious and objective evaluation to fundamentals of the Charter" League members should interview city officials and administrative

⁴⁷ Planning Needs in the Omaha-Douglas County Area, published by the Omaha League, 1961; A Study of Governmental Solutions to Metropolitan Regional Needs, published by the Omaha League, 1962; "Historical Highlights," 7-10.

⁴⁸ The Omaha Home Rule Charter of the City of Omaha, 1956.

heads who had been functioning under the Charter.⁴⁹ The Omaha League published its study results in a booklet titled A Study of the Operations of City Government Under the 1956 Charter. The League consensus was that "the Charter is a most effective and operative instrument . . ." ⁵⁰

Following the formation of the Charter Study Convention, League members also reviewed and evaluated the proposed charter changes. During the following year, 1965-66, League members decided to lobby the public in support of the proposed amendments to the City Charter which the Charter Study Convention had classified as "urgent."⁵¹

Throughout the 1960s, urban renewal was also a subject of Omaha League study and eventually received the organization's support. When the League began studying this problem, members started by touring "decaying sections of the city." Reactions to the tours varied; however, all members hoped to collect data that would help them find solutions to the problem.⁵²

The League realized that accurate information was needed to dispel misconceptions people had about the problem. Many Omahans, including League members, believed

⁴⁹ A Study of the Operations of City Government Under the 1956 Charter.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Omaha World-Herald, March 13, 1964 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁵² Ibid., September 7, 1962 (clipping file), HSDC.

that some of the people in these distressed areas preferred to live under slum conditions and "did not want to be bothered." Others believed the only solution was to shove those distressed parts of the city into the river "and start all over."⁵³

After six months of study, "and lively discussion of the study by League members," League consensus was reached favoring development of a community-wide program to guide future city action in urban renewal. The League's research was compiled and distributed to public officials and libraries in order to increase public awareness about these troubled areas and the need for action. Letters of concern were also sent to the mayor, city council, Urban Renewal Advisory Board and the Planning Board informing them of the League's position.⁵⁴

Among the League's recommendations was that of establishing an Urban Renewal Authority and League members sought support from the mayor to accomplish this goal. However, Mayor James Dworak, who ran on a platform opposing federally funded urban renewal, averted the League's request initially by arguing he would not set up an Urban Renewal Authority without first a vote of the people. This did not

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ A Study of Urban Renewal Programs, published by the Omaha League, 1962; Omaha League News Release on Urban Renewal, released December 27, 1962, LWVGO archives.

stop the League's efforts.⁵⁵

In March 1963, City Councilman Arthur Bradley, Jr. introduced an ordinance to create an Urban Renewal Authority in Omaha. The City Council assigned March 26, 1963 for the public hearing date and League members responded. During the public hearing, Mrs. Bruce Stafford, President of the Omaha League, testified in support of the proposed ordinance:

. . . it is imperative that an agency be established as a coordinating force in our city for all activity relating to changing land use conditions. We already need such coordination in relocation brought about by the interstate highway, in determining location sites for the recently authorized housing units for the elderly, disposition of the old postoffice building, and others. To delay creating such an agency could prove a serious mistake in the orderly development of such projects.⁵⁶

When the City Council vote finally came, it was after a stormy five-hour hearing that lasted until one o'clock in the morning. Early in the morning, after the testimony ended, a predicted four to three Council vote passed the authority ordinance. However, holding true to his promise, Mayor Dworak immediately vetoed the Urban Authority

⁵⁵ Omaha World-Herald, December 28, 1962 (clipping file), HSDC; Sorensen, 76.

⁵⁶ Donald Louis Stevens, Jr., "The Urban Renewal Movement in Omaha, 1954-1970"; (Omaha: M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1981), 112-118; A Progress Report on Urban Renewal in Omaha, 1963.

authorization.⁵⁷

Along with numerous other individuals and organizations, the League was unwilling to accept defeat of the Authority issue. The Omaha League's research led into a widened study in 1963-64, continuing to favor the development of a community-wide program to guide city action in Urban Renewal planning. The League made it their goal to find solutions to the following questions:

1. How will we get an Urban Authority--by ordinance or by a vote of the people, and when?
2. How can informed members of the community best proceed to clarify misapprehension concerning urban renewal?⁵⁸

In 1965, one and a half years after the City Council vote, Councilman H.F. Jacobberger proposed a public vote on the issue. Prior to the election, the League took an active part in promoting an educational campaign in the community. According to Mrs. Milton G. Waldbaum, League president in 1964, the campaign included speakers, posters, tours of blighted areas and meetings. However, in May 1965, the issue to create an Urban Renewal Authority lost at the polls as 32,042 Omahans voted in favor of the issue while 65,932 voted against an Urban Authority.⁵⁹

⁵⁷ Stevens, "The Urban Renewal Movement," 112-118.

⁵⁸ A Progress Report on Urban Renewal in Omaha, 1963.

⁵⁹ Ibid.; Omaha World-Herald, April 6, 1965 (clipping file), HSDC; Stevens, "The Urban Renewal Movement," 119; Comprehensive Urban Renewal in Omaha, published by the Omaha League, 1969.

Support of a comprehensive urban renewal program remained on the Omaha's League program during the 1960s and 1970s. In 1970 the issue came before the electorate for the last time, with full support from the League of Women Voters of Omaha. The League published an informational packet entitled Comprehensive Urban Renewal, outlining the need for this authority. League members also began an information campaign to lobby the public for their support at the election. Once again, voters rejected the proposal.⁶⁰

As an outgrowth of its work to promote Urban Renewal, League members also became interested in fair housing practices in Omaha. In 1968, units of the Omaha League of Women Voters set up guidelines for fair housing standards based on the group's national program. One year later, League members endorsed Legislative Bill 1033 that would permit Omaha to pass ordinances prohibiting racial discrimination in housing, labor unions, employment and public accommodations.⁶¹

LB 1033 was introduced into the Nebraska Legislature in February 1969 by Senator Edward Danner, the Legislature's only Black member at the time. The bill was meant to give the Omaha City Council broad powers to enact civil rights ordinances. Specifically, it would mean the Council could

⁶⁰ Comprehensive Urban Renewal.

⁶¹ Omaha World-Herald, October 28, 1968; April 9, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

enact a city open-housing law and pass ordinances prohibiting discrimination in labor unions, employment and public accommodations. The bill was also intended to permit the Council to give the Human Relations Department subpoena powers, which would enable the department to investigate complaints of discrimination and compel witnesses to testify at hearings. The bill incorporated many recommendations made by committee to study the city Human Relations Department. Committee members had been appointed by Mayor A.V. Sorensen.⁶²

In April, 1969, the measure was scheduled for hearing by the Legislature's Miscellaneous Subjects Committee. Prior to the hearing League members sent out a news release in support of the bill. League members argued that "all levels of government should share the responsibility for equality of opportunity for all citizens."⁶³

On the day of the hearing, Mrs. Cecil A. Johnson, President of the Nebraska League of Women Voters, represented the League's interest before the hearing committee. Numerous other organizations were present and

⁶² Ibid., March 2, 1969.

⁶³ The hearing was held on April 10, 1969. Omaha World-Herald, April 9, 1969; Eightieth Legislative Session, Minutes of the Committee on Miscellaneous Subjects, Committee Statements on LB 1033, 1.

spoke on behalf of both sides of the issue.⁶⁴

In May, LB 1033 was placed on the general file. On August 7 the bill was considered before the legislature; it was indefinitely postponed for the session. This piece of legislation never passed the legislature.⁶⁵

While urban renewal and fair housing issues remained at the top of the League's agenda throughout the 1960s, a new issue also caught the League's attention in 1965. A League consensus to support programs to improve Omaha Public Library services came out of the 1965-66 study. The comprehensive look taken at the Omaha Public Library in 1966 resulted in the adoption of a "Continuing Responsibility" item at the 1967 Omaha League's Annual Meeting that supported plans for an adequate new Main Library building and improved services of the Omaha Public Library. In order to achieve its desired results, League members campaigned publicly for a new facility. The awareness campaign included sponsoring tours of the old public library. League members, "wearing old-fashioned costumes," worked with the library staff to conduct tours pointing out deficiencies in the old library structure. According to former League president Sylvia Wagner, "we showed them what we had, what we didn't have, and what we needed . . . that was quite a

⁶⁴ Eightieth Legislative Session, Minutes of the Committee on Miscellaneous Subjects, Committee Statements on LB 1033, 1.

⁶⁵ Nebraska State Legislative Journal, 1969.

day that every Leaguer who was ever involved certainly remembers." Although Wagner admits that the public knew about the problems of the Library, the tours helped resolve the problem with expedience. As she said, ". . . this was one way to put a tremendous spotlight on the issue, all the media covered it, and that was what we wanted to accomplish." This campaign for a new Library facility would continue into the 1970s.⁶⁶

League members kept informed on Library issues and other civic concerns through the League's "Observer Corps." Members of this committee would sit in on meetings of the City Council, Douglas County Board of Commissioners, Omaha and District 66 Boards of Education, the Library Board, Omaha Housing Authority, Metropolitan Area Planning Agency (MAPA), and the Greater Omaha Community Action. Observers would take notes and keep the League board and League members informed of the actions of these public bodies. Observers also had orders to call the League office if something of immediate concern would be discussed, especially if it was a matter on which the League had taken a position. This crucial role of "watchdog" continues to be an important practice of the League today.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Omaha World-Herald article and photo (undated) (LWVGO scrapbook 1967-68), League archives; Sylvia Wagner Interview, March 12, 1996.

⁶⁷ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

As the League prepared to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary in the spring of 1970, its mission held strong to its original intent that "Democratic government depends upon the informed and active participation of its citizens." By all accounts, League members were both informed and active. In 1969, Mayor Eugene Leahy described the League as being a "tremendous influence" in the city. Other politicians described the League as being "effective in shaping the destiny of our city" and "helpful in safeguarding democracy."⁶⁸

In spite of the League's many accomplishments during its fifty-year history, League members looked ahead to what they had yet to accomplish. In 1969, the Omaha League took on a development campaign to raise \$60,000 with the expectation of expanding their educational services. Although League members were driven by their pride in their accomplishments, they recognized the magnitude of the challenges ahead. While celebrating their fifty years of accomplishments, League members were convinced that the goals and purpose of their organization were even more desirable and vital than ever before.⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.; Young, In the Public Interest, 178.

CHAPTER IV

THE LAST QUARTER CENTURY: 1970-1995

In the 1970s, the League consistently acted to support or improve government programs and policies, especially those aimed at combatting poverty and discrimination. With the start of a new decade came a renewed interest in past issues and a completely new perspective on some of them.

Throughout the 1970s and the early 1980s the national League overwhelmingly supported ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA). Although the amendment received little League support when it was first proposed in the early 1930s, by the 1960s many League members as individuals had become increasingly sympathetic to the cause. While such action did not imply any increased radicalism on the part of the League membership, they did believe that "equal rights for all regardless of sex" was a fundamental part of the League's long-term support for equal opportunity in education, employment and housing.¹

While the Equal Rights Amendment enjoyed strong support from many individuals and national women's organizations, the issue still received much resistance from more conservative groups. Many women at this time enjoyed their

¹ Intelligent Voter, 10 (November, 1932): 3; A Great Idea Through the Years: 1920 to Present (League of Women Voters, 1984), LWVGO archives, 6.

separate spheres and resisted efforts to interfere with practices which they believed benefitted them. Thus, when Congress passed the ERA in 1970 and it was sent to the states for ratification, conservative women's groups helped to defeat the amendment.²

Although many League members supported the amendment, the national League had yet to take an official position. According to former Omaha League president Barba Edwards, in the 1960s:

the local League members would support the idea that there should be changes in the amendment . . . but the national League did not . . . the national League did not take a stand at the national Convention because there was not a general consensus.³

The national League was criticized at this time for not taking a more active role in support of the amendment. One League critic argued that "the League of Women Voters has helped with prison reform and the enfranchisement of Indians. It has espoused the causes of many people, but what has it done for women? . . . Doesn't charity begin at home?"⁴

The League has often been criticized for moving slowly;

² Arthur M. Schlesinger, The Almanac of American History (Greenwich: Bison Books, 1983), 590.

³ Interview by author with Barba Edwards, February 17, 1996.

⁴ Omaha World-Herald, April 7, 1972 (Clipping file), Historical Society of Douglas County. Hereafter cited as HSDC.

however, critics may not understand how deliberate and careful the League must be before taking action.⁵

According to one League member, the League did not take a position on the ERA early on because "the League is very careful about constitutional changes . . . you just don't fiddle with the constitution . . . but the pressure came from the feminist groups . . . they felt very strongly that we should support it . . . I was told that the National conventions were very bloody in those days."⁶

In May 1972, the League's national convention finally endorsed the ERA. Thereafter, the League of Women Voters remained in the forefront of ERA ratification efforts on the national, state and local levels. In ten years, the national League raised more than \$2.5 million for the cause.⁷

While the ERA was never listed as an agenda item for the Omaha League, it was an issue that held the interest and

⁵ "Before the League can take action, members must agree in broad terms on what they think about various aspects of a program issue." Consensus is required for all League stands on issues. See In League, Procedures Manual for the League of Women Voters, published by the national League, 1989.

⁶ Edwards Interview.

⁷ In the 1970s actual membership of feminist organizations was small. The National Organization of Women had only about 30,000 members in 1973, but the membership of the LWV was about 160,000. See Lois W. Banner, Women in Modern America (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc, 1974) 232-233; Changed Forever, published by the national League, 1984.

support of many of its members, both before and after the national League took a position.

In Omaha, League members participated in marches, (whenever there was a national march, there was always a local march), and by informing the electorate through publications and fact sheets.⁸ Former Omaha League president Wanda Blotcky articulated the Omaha League's commitment in 1977 when she stated that the ERA was "as important as one-man, one-vote or the 19th amendment which gave women the vote . . . it is a fundamental principle for which we stand."⁹

When Nebraska became the first state in the Union to ratify the ERA, League members were supportive. However, when Nebraska less than a year later rescinded the ratification, Omaha League members were caught off guard. According to Mrs. Emmajean Wupper, "after the Legislature had approved it (the ERA) we began working on other things . . . suddenly there was the move to repeal the ERA and we spent too much time reacting to arguments instead of stating why women should be a part of the Constitution."¹⁰

⁸ ERA Report, published by the National League, May 1981; The Equal Rights Amendment, A Summary, published by the Omaha League (undated); and Changed Forever, published by the national League.

⁹ Omaha World-Herald, September 8, 1977 (clipping file), HSDC.

¹⁰ Sun Newspapers, May 31, 1973 (clipping file), HSDC. Following the repeal of the ERA, Mrs. Wupper showed her disappointment with her State Senator by running against him

While the issue of equal rights for women is still discussed by many Omaha League members, the League's efforts waned in 1976, after the deadline passed to ratify the constitutional amendment. The national League closed its ERA campaign office in July 1982; the League's advocacy agenda continues to include "equal rights for women."¹¹

The issue of the Equal Rights Amendment brought other social problems to the forefront. According to Sylvia Wagner, former League president, after fighting for the ERA "then we realized that equal pay was not the only issue, we realized that we needed day care. Then we started studying the day care issue, that was a huge issue. It was a natural outgrowth, we started to think about all the children."¹²

In 1971, the national League took a formal position on day care, stating that "supportive services should be available--but not compulsory--for participants in income assistance programs. Most important among these are child care. . . ." Since then, local Leagues across the country have taken up the issue.¹³

in the next election. Wupper Interview.

¹¹ ERA Report, national League The Equal Rights Amendment, A Summary, Omaha League; and Changed Forever national League; Interview by author with Deborah Suttle, August 7, 1996.

¹² Interview by author with Sylvia Wagner, March 12, 1996.

¹³ Update, published by the Omaha League, 1981. (Report from the Human Resources Committee, League of Women Voters of Omaha.)

In 1978, following the lead of the Nebraska League of Women Voters, the Omaha League added "child care" as an agenda item for study by the Human Resources committee. In the years that followed, Omaha League members made frequent surprise visits to local day care centers and published numerous studies including "Working Mother and Child" (1979) and "Child Care Comes of Age" (1986).¹⁴ Throughout the 1980s and still today the LWV has remained extremely active in working for children's rights and for stringent day care legislation and licensing.¹⁵

The Omaha League supported women's efforts in many other ways, most prominently by teaching women to become effective candidates for public office. Both nationally and locally, more women were running for public office in the 1970s than ever before. While other organizations were needed to help elect women to public office, it was the LWV that trained women for these leadership positions. A 1974 national study of elected women found that the LWV was the typical path to elected office. Similarly, a 1987 study concluded that involvement in civic organizations, especially women's groups, is the usual path for women

¹⁴ Omaha World-Herald, March 24, 1978; January 31, 1979; May 23, 1979 (Clipping file), HSDC.

¹⁵ Omaha World-Herald, May 23, 1979, League archives; League of Women Voters Yearbooks: 1970-1995; Working Mother and Child, published by the Omaha League, 1979; Child Care Comes of Age, published by the Omaha League, 1986.

politicians, with League membership the most common.¹⁶

According to one Omaha League member who ran for office in 1972, "we feel if there is any group of women that should be prepared to take leadership, we ought to because of our education."¹⁷ Other League members in the same position have agreed, "because of our League training we have studied how government works and we had a very good background for running for office . . . we felt informed."¹⁸ Among the women whom the Omaha League has assisted in developing their skills are Sylvia Wagner, Betty Abbott, and Connie Findlay who ran for City Council; Emmajean Wupper and Deborah Suttle for State Legislature; Deanna Frisk for Natural Resources District board, and many others.

Although important, women's issues were only a few of the proposals to come before the League-and these were not necessarily the issues that received the most attention. Perhaps the largest project the national LWV undertook in its history came in 1976 with its sponsorship of the presidential debates.

For the LWV, sponsorship of presidential debates was a logical step in a long tradition of voter service.

¹⁶ Nancy M. Neuman, The League of Women Voters (Washington, D.C., League of Women Voters of the United States, 1994), 38-39.

¹⁷ Omaha World-Herald, May 6, 1972, League archives.

¹⁸ Interview by author with Emmajean Wupper, August 7, 1996.

Beginning with the 1920 election the LWV held state and local candidate meetings to educate newly enfranchised women. More recently the forums were described as a "new kind of political meeting . . . which is more popular than the old fashioned rally. All candidates of all parties appear on the same platform and submit to questions."¹⁹

In 1952 the LWV took this political forum to the nation. In that year, the national League, with Life Magazine, co-sponsored its first televised primary debate, a forum that included Republican and Democratic candidates. However, eight years later, following the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates, no debates were held between candidates for President of the United States until 1976. This was primarily due to the "equal-time provisions" of the National Communications Act that required broadcasters to include all candidates for a particular office or give them equal time.

In 1975, the FCC reinterpreted this ruling to exempt from the equal time requirements such "bona fide news events" as live broadcasts of debates by legally qualified candidates sponsored by "non broadcast entities." And so in 1976, the LWV was the first organization to sponsor live presidential debates under the new ruling. The League sponsored three debates between President Gerald Ford and

¹⁹ Louise M. Young, In the Public Interest (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 48-49.

challenger Jimmy Carter.²⁰

Before the debates were set, Omaha League members did their part to start a local petition drive encouraging the two major presidential candidates to participate in the League-sponsored debates. Omaha League members attended the Douglas County Fair and gathered thousands of signatures for the cause. The national League collected four million signatures. While League members recognize that the documents would have no legal power, they still hoped they would help persuade the two candidates to join their debate.²¹

Clearly the debates of 1976 were a victory for the League and "a major factor in the elections," stated the executive director of the national League shortly after the debates. "We broke tradition. We broke the in-thinking in all the media, not only the networks. And for that we deserve a lot of credit."²²

The League's efforts to televise debates carried over to the vice-presidential debates and local elections. The League sponsored debates between Senators Robert Dole and Walter Mondale, making them the first vice-presidential

²⁰ Neuman, The League of Women Voters, 39-40.

²¹ Omaha World-Herald, August 21, 1976 (clipping file), HSDC.

²² *Ibid.*, January 2, 1977 (clipping file), HSDC.

candidates to participate in a nationally televised debate.²³

Taking the lead in Omaha elections, League members also sponsored debates for two local elections the same year. U.S. Senate candidates Edward Zorinsky and John McCollister and Congressional candidates John Cavanaugh and Lee Terry became the first local candidates to be asked to participate in these history-making locally televised debates. Mrs. Sylvia Wagner, who moderated several of the early televised debates for the League, recalled that the League was the only group at the time which was sponsoring local political debates. According to Mrs. Wagner, "the debates were held in public halls, [and] we would always construct our questions ahead of time . . . there was no cross debating and the questions were always left open for full answers."²⁴

These debates are now a long running tradition for the League and League members have earned a sterling reputation for this community service. "I was very proud of the League . . . it was probably the biggest shot of publicity for the League," according to Ms. Edwards. "I think if anyone wants a real honest debate they will ask the league to do it . . . but we make a lot of enemies . . . we don't take sides, the

²³ Ibid., August 21, 1976; October 7, 1976 (clipping file), HSDC.

²⁴ Ibid., September 22, 1976 (clipping file), HSDC; Wagner Interview.

questions have to be open and not closed . . . it is very rigorous to put them together, we did seven last year . . . and I wouldn't want to live through that again . . . but it's very necessary and our debates are fair."²⁵

The League also provided a speakers' bureau to spread information on the issues. According to Mrs. Wagner, who gave approximately forty presentations a year when she was active, "we in the committee took the issues that were on the ballot and translated them from legaleze to English . . . and at that time they really needed to be translated, then we--to the best of our ability--gave both sides of the issue."²⁶

Like today, many of the League's efforts in the 1970s were concentrated on local concerns. Each year a full slate of issues was set as priorities for study or action and the League's involvement with an issue often grew deeper as time passed. Issues such as Charter amendment review, support for adequate library facilities, evaluation of police-community relations, and changes in the City Council election process remained on the League's agenda throughout much of the 1970s. (See Appendix B)

The League's interest in Charter amendment began in the 1950s and has continued through today. In the 1950s, the League led campaigns to support the original document, and

²⁵ Edwards Interview.

²⁶ Ibid.

in later years has been supportive of its reviews and proposed revisions. In 1958, when an effort was made to return the city to the commission form of government, the League joined forces with City Council President Al Sorensen, who had been Chairman of the 1956 City Charter Convention, and others to retain the new form of government as prescribed by the new charter. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the League continued to support Charter amendments and worked to educate the public on the specific details of the proposed changes.²⁷

However, in 1972, League members proposed changes to the Charter that would this time put them at odds with Al Sorensen. The previous year, a League study of the method of electing city council members proposed changes to the system. The League announced on January 2, 1972 that they would press for a change in the City Charter which would allow the election of city council members by district.²⁸

²⁷ A Study of Operations of City Government Under The 1956 Charter, published by the Omaha League, 1964; "Historical Highlights," Notes on the Omaha League prepared in 1967, Nebraska State Historical Society archives, #MS0307, 8; and Harl Dalstrom, A.V. Sorensen and the New Omaha (Omaha: Lamplighter Press, 1987) 102.

²⁸ Omaha has had an erratic history of electoral processes, changing from district to at-large elections. (See Garneth Peterson, The Omaha City Council and Commission: A Profile, 1858-1930. Omaha: M.A. Thesis, University of Nebraska at Omaha, 1980.)

In 1956, the City Charter provided that City Council elections in Omaha would be at-large elections: "All seven Councilmen shall be elected by the people on an at-large, non-partisan basis and shall serve for the term of four

Their proposal also called for the addition of two more members to the present seven-member council. Their goal was to provide better representation for all areas of the city.²⁹

According to former League president Emmajean Wupper, "we felt that there needed to be better representation, prior to this time there had been a City Council made up entirely of members who came from the Dundee area, they were smart and they did well, but it wasn't fair representation for the whole city."³⁰

Sorensen and others expressed their concerns immediately. Sorensen responded in a letter sent to Omaha League president Mrs. Griffith Salisbury, cautioning League members about their proposal. Sorensen wrote:

We spent considerable time and substantial money getting research in depth on this subject and weighed it carefully for a long time. Later, when the city had a Charter review, this subject was again given thorough consideration and considerable research was done in depth for the second time . . . It was concluded then . . . that electing councilmen from districts is a backward step in city government . . . in my judgement probably the worst development we could have in Omaha would be to have a single council member directly concerned with those special problems

years." (See The Home Rule Charter of the City of Omaha, 1956, section 8, subsection 15.)

²⁹ Methods of City Council Election, published by the Omaha League, October 1971; "A Look at How City Council Members Are Elected in 11 Other Cities," (fact sheet distributed by the Omaha League), 1972; Omaha World-Herald, January 2, 1972; January 4, 1972 (clipping file), HSDC.

³⁰ Wupper Interview.

with which black citizens must live.³¹

League members also received opposition from Mayor Eugene Leahy and five members of the city council. Councilman Arthur D. Bradley, who "vigorously opposed" any move to change to elections by districts, argued that "most of the problems we deal with concern the whole city, not just one area . . . if a larger percentage of minority groups would register and vote, they could elect anyone they wanted to the City Council."³² Council member Betty Abbott, a member of the League, said that theoretically election by district might seem a good thing, but warned that the practical application might be something far different than a more representative government.³³

Although the proposal was designed to provide minorities with better representation, State Senator Ernie Chambers, who represented a largely Black North Omaha constituency, opposed the League's plan in favor of his own. Chambers proposed a twelve-member council that would be elected by district. He asserted that by looking at the situation using "demographic arithmetic," this was the only way to yield the results that would benefit the black

³¹ Omaha World-Herald, January 5, 1972 (clipping file), HSDC.

³² *Ibid.*, January 3, 1972 (clipping file), HSDC.

³³ *Ibid.*

community.³⁴

The League of Women Voters debated this issue in the press through the next few years. League members articulately presented their views in published reports and in a series of essays in the Omaha World-Herald they presented their research and defended specific aspects of the plan that were under attack.³⁵

The League argued that it did not oppose the concept of at-large council members. In a Omaha World-Herald clipping the League stated that:

Some [at-large city council members] are needed to provide the overview and to inform district council members of city-wide problems. However, League members also believe strongly that district council members are also needed to inform at-large members of the day-to-day problems facing areas of the city.³⁶

This issue remained on the League's agenda through the 1970s. After three rejections of district elections by the voters, the Nebraska Legislature passed a law in 1979 calling for district elections in metropolitan cities in Nebraska. The bill, which was introduced by Senator Ernie Chambers, received the full support of the League. It was finally passed on the closing day of the 1979 legislative

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid., January 8, 1972, October 28, 1972 (Clipping file, HSDC); Methods of City Council Elections; "A Look At How City Council Members are Elected in 11 Other Cities," report prepared by the Omaha League (undated).

³⁶ Ibid., October 28, 1972 (clipping file), HSDC.

session.³⁷

As a result of the legislation, City Council elections by district began in Omaha in 1981. Since this initial election which included all seven districts, the even-numbered and odd-numbered districts have alternated elections every two years.

League members still review this issue periodically. Studies immediately following the first district elections showed that voter turn-out was lower overall, a situation most noticeable in Omaha's second district. Later League studies indicated the number of candidates running and the voter turnout remained noticeably lower for district elections than for at-large elections.³⁸ In spite of these drawbacks, League members still prefer district elections. According to Deb Suttle, former League president, "the League thinks it still a better way of doing elections . . . before district elections there never was a black person or a woman on the City Council, now we have both."³⁹

In the mid-1960s League members began to support efforts for a new downtown library and other improved

³⁷ Omaha City Elections, Voter Turnout and Filling a Vacancy in the Office of Mayor, published by the national League, 1988; Omaha World-Herald, April 8, 1981 (clipping file), HSDC.

³⁸ Omaha: City Elections, Voter Turnout and Filling a Vacancy in the Office of Mayor; Omaha World-Herald, April 9, 1981; April 8, 1981; Sun Newspapers, May 13, 1981 (all newspaper articles found in the clipping file), HSDC.

³⁹ Suttle Interview.

services of the Omaha Public Library. Through the early 1970s, the League continued their Library awareness campaign by providing tours and writing regular advocacy pieces in the Omaha World-Herald. League members also worked closely with Library Director Frank Gibson to understand his needs and then addressed the City Council for financial support for the proposed six million dollar structure.⁴⁰

In 1974, when it looked as though six million dollars would not be enough to adequately meet the Library's needs and plan for future growth, League members returned to the City Council seeking further support. According to Mrs. Sylvia Wagner, "whenever there was anytime that we could have any input for the creation of the new library, we were there . . . but then we continued, we have always supported adequate library facilities." This remained an active League agenda item from 1965 to 1977. In 1977, the W. Dale Clark Library opened with 124,500 sq. ft. of space and room for 600,000 books.⁴¹

League members assisted the Omaha Police Department with the same vigor they gave the Omaha Public Library. Again, their interest was to insure that the Police Department was able to effectively serve the needs of the entire community. Like all issues the League took on,

⁴⁰ Omaha World-Herald, January 31, 1973 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, May 22, 1974, LWVGO archives; Sun Newspapers, March 24, 1977 (clipping file), HSDC; Wagner Interview.

League members began with an evaluation of the system, this time specifically looking at police-community relations. While it was never specifically discussed nor deemed a motivating factor, it is interesting to note that their studies followed on the heels of some of Omaha's largest race riots in which police and members of the North Omaha community confronted each other.

In January 1971, the League presented the results of its one-year study. The study group concluded that relations between the police and the adult white community in Omaha were reasonably satisfactory, but relations "are definitely not good" between police and youths or between police and minority groups.

Some of the findings of the survey included:

1. That the Omaha police recruits were not receiving nearly enough training in human relations.
2. That various community groups had tried to initiate dialogue between the citizens and the police but were unsuccessful.
3. Many citizens believed that it would be beneficial to include citizens in a review of citizen complaints against policemen.⁴²

Based on the results of their findings, the League's study group made several recommendations for improving police-community relations. The most controversial recommendation called for an independent complaint board to

⁴² Police-Community Relations in Omaha, published by the Omaha League (undated); Omaha World-Herald, January 27, 1971 (clipping file), HSDC.

be set up to investigate police-community relations grievances. The League's report indicated that "the city lacked a workable mechanism for handling such grievances."⁴³

This recommendation received an immediate negative response from the Police Union. The Police Union reported one day after the League's report that they would "vigorously oppose" any attempt to create an independent complaint board to investigate police-community relations grievances.⁴⁴

At City Hall the recommendation received mixed reviews. While Public Safety Director Al Pattavina believed that there was already a complaint mechanism in place with the FBI and the Courts, Human Relations Director Roger Sayers believed differently. Sayers argued that this was something he had been saying for a long time and that he would support several different approaches.

Little support came from the Omaha World-Herald. In an editorial, the paper argued that the League's recommendations were impractical and five years too late. The newspaper based its conclusions on a court case in Philadelphia, abolishing their own city's citizen review committee. In the Philadelphia case the court ruled that

⁴³ Police-Community Relations in Omaha; Omaha World Herald, March 10, 1971 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁴⁴ Omaha World-Herald, March 11, 1971 (clipping file), HSDC.

the citizen review committee had created "an unquestionable menace to law enforcement and hence to the public welfare."⁴⁵

The Omaha League of Women Voters continued to study the issue and report on their findings. Open discussions were held and frequent League letters were submitted to the Omaha World-Herald for publication. Although League members remained flexible in their suggested approaches, they insisted that the grievance procedure of the Omaha Police Division needed drastic improvement. According to Mrs. Sylvia Wagner, former League president:

. . . there was no doubt that we needed sensitivity training for the police, there was no doubt that there needed to be some way to have a board of inquiry that was outside of the internal affairs, because not everything had to do with legality, it wasn't a matter of law . . . and let me tell you it wasn't always a black-white issue, a lot of it was an issue of the relations between the police and the youth.⁴⁶

Police-Community relations held the League's attention for much of the early 1970s. In 1973, the League added to their agenda the goal of establishing a publicized telephone directory listing for citizens to channel compliments and complaints. Through the efforts of an entire coalition of interested organizations and individuals, a phone listing and grievance committee was established. According to Mrs.

⁴⁵ Ibid., March 17, 1971 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁴⁶ Letters and clippings found in the LWVGO archives; Wagner Interview.

Wagner, these tasks were accomplished "by working in cooperation with the mayor, the police chief himself, the city council, . . . it takes a lot, it didn't just happen because of a little group of women decide they want to have it."

This was a typical process for any League agenda item. According to Wagner, "the League has always been very good at coalition building, . . . they will find other groups that might be interested, after they finished their study, and they want to take a position, and they want to take action on it."⁴⁷ Using "coalition building" as an efficient means to carry out their goals, League members would take on numerous human relations issues during the 1970s.

The League began the decade with criticism from the Black community. In 1969, Charles Washington, news editor for the Omaha Star, described the League as "too little, too late and too white."⁴⁸ He complained that the League had been late in taking stands on vital issues which affected blacks.

While League members understand his perspective, they also see that Washington and other critics did not understand that the League had to study an issue and reach a

⁴⁷ Wagner Interview.

⁴⁸ Sun Newspapers, September 4, 1969 (clipping file), HSDC.

consensus before an action could be taken--and this process took a great deal of time. League members contend that much was accomplished to assist African Americans living in Omaha--once the issues were studied.

African Americans in the Omaha League have always been few in number according to Ms. Barba Edwards, the first African-American to head the League and one of approximately twenty minority persons in a total of 226 members. In 1970, fewer than three percent of the 250 League members were minorities. In spite of this racial imbalance, the League contributed significantly to causes that were aimed at helping minorities in the community.

In addition to promoting city council elections by district, the LWVGO in the 1970s assisted with the school integration process. Although the League never took a formal issue on school integration, it worked hard to promote the idea of "good education for everyone."⁴⁹

In 1974, when the Justice Department gave a desegregation directive to school districts, the League formally supported efforts of Omaha's 135-member school Integration Committee. As a result of their studies, both the Integration Committee and the League of Women Voters supported clustering of high schools and elementary schools, the abolition of the school district's transfer policy, and the adoption of a policy setting up roughly an 80-20 ratio

⁴⁹ Edwards Interview.

of white to black students in all of the schools in the system.⁵⁰

However, when bussing children in Omaha came under judicial order and Omaha schools were forced to comply beginning in the fall of 1976, League members supported the school board and the people involved in implementing the bussing process. According to former League president Mrs. Wagner:

. . . the way it was handled here in Omaha was a model . . . Did everybody like it? Absolutely not! But, it was handled so well. The Leaguers were there helping every way they could . . . it was done with panache, class and with respect . . . I can not give you enough positives on how the school board and the school administration carried this out.⁵¹

The League's deep interest in promoting environmental as well as human resources was similarly evident at this time. Environmental issues reached the forefront of the national LWV's program in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. But again, these issues were not new to the LWV, which had worked on health and sanitation issues in the 1920s and 1930s. The continuation of their studies in the mid-1950s had focused on water resources and led the way for further work in the 1970s and 1980s on air pollution, land use and energy conservation.

⁵⁰ Omaha World-Herald, July 14, 1973; January 23, 1974; February 21, 1974 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁵¹ Wagner Interview; Omaha World-Herald, September 7, 1976 (clipping file), HSDC.

Throughout the last twenty-five years, the League has built a sequence of broad national positions on water as well as air, waste management, land use and energy issues. The League nationally has translated these positions into action in states and localities across the country. League members have tackled such problems as public transportation, location of power plants, maintenance of air quality standards, solid waste disposal, the disposal of hazardous substances, and ways to encourage conservation.⁵²

In Omaha, much of this work translated into taking on energy studies and overseeing important changes in the public utility systems. The Omaha League placed this issue on its Program Agenda in 1976 and these items remain important issues today.

The Omaha League's greatest efforts have gone into issues relating to utility rate structures. In 1976, League members began to study rate structures that were commonly used to set utility prices and focused on how these structures affected energy conservation. After one year of study, the Omaha League adopted a plan of action dedicated to changing the water rate structures in order to promote conservation. Specifically they sought to require those consumers who created peak summer demand to bear the cost. One year later, in 1978, the LWVO proposed similar changes

⁵² Idea, 6.

to the electric rate system.⁵³

Throughout the 1980s discussions continued regarding the rate structures of these two utilities. The League proposed water rates that would "hit big users the hardest." Deanna Frisk, past League president, was one of many spokespersons for the League on this subject. She noted that residential water use in Omaha peaks sharply in summer, adding: "these peaks, resulting from lawn watering and other hot weather demands, accelerate the obsolescence of existing capital facilities and create the need for costly expanded facilities to meet the additional demand that lie idle a good portion of the year."⁵⁴

In its studies and reports to the newspapers, the LWVO argued that existing flat rate structures were not equitable because the customer who used the same amount of water all year would subsidize the customer who used large amounts during the summer. The League's position was:

We believe it is much more equitable to charge customers who create the summer peaking problems with the cost of providing the additional service. . . . In the old days the theory was that it became cheaper to serve a customer the more the customer used. . . . We need to get away from 'the more you use the cheaper it gets' philosophy.⁵⁵

⁵³ League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha Yearbook, 1975, 1976, and 1977; Rates: Do They Influence Conservation of Water?, published by the Omaha League, 1977.

⁵⁴ Omaha World-Herald, May 3, 1979 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

The board of directors for the Metropolitan Utilities District was quick to respond to the League's concerns. In May, 1979, the directors changed their rate structure to one that would charge a customer more per unit as consumption increased.⁵⁶

Suggested changes to the electric utility rates required a more strenuous effort than changes to the water rate structure. League studies called for Omaha Public Power District to adopt an inverted rate structure that recognized the particular problems of low and fixed income customers and promoted conservation by rewarding low users with lower rates. The district's declining-block rate structure charges that were in place were charging users less for electricity as consumption climbed over a certain level. Instead, the League's proposed inverted rate structure would increase the cost of electricity with increased consumption.⁵⁷

The League also took the stand that customers should only have to pay their actual cost of service. According to League studies, rate structures caused residential customers to subsidize OPPD's cost of producing electricity for large business customers.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Electric Rates, published by the Omaha League, 1977; Omaha World-Herald, July 25, 1980 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁵⁸ Electric Rates; Omaha World-Herald, December 17, 1983 and November 30, 1983 (clipping file), HSDC.

This argument brought editorial criticism from the Omaha World-Herald, the Chamber of Commerce, and the small business community. OPPD officials also argued that by changing to an inverted rate structure "it would make the cost of electricity exorbitant for many large users."⁵⁹ The League continued its information campaigns in the same way they approached all difficult issues and the League accomplished its task of changing OPPD's rate structure in 1983. League members continue to study and hold meetings to publicly discuss more current issues relating to utility rates.

While continuing to push for action on key environmental and social policy issues, during the 1980s the League also refocused its attention on fundamental principles of citizen rights, including reproductive rights for women.

From the 1970s to the 1990s, the issue of abortion was very divisive. The League did not take a stand on the question initially, in part because it did not feel it necessary to do so. According to Sylvia Wagner, when the League looks at an issue

. . . one of the things the League says is -- 'who else is working on this issue?' If an issue is being taken care of, we don't have to get involved, we have to go where there is no involvement, where there is a need . . . there were other organizations involved in this issue,

⁵⁹ Omaha World-Herald, December 6, 1983 (clipping file), HSDC.

so the League did not take a position for a long time . . . but when it came to the issue of should it be legislated -- then it became not a matter or pro-abortion or pro-life, then it became an issue of should it be a matter of the law -- then the League felt it should take a position.⁶⁰

The national League declared its support in 1982 for the right of women in the United States to have an abortion. The statement read: "the League believes that public policy in a pluralistic society must affirm the constitutional right of privacy of the individual to make reproductive choices." National League President Dorothy Ridings said that ninety-two percent of 985 League chapters responding said they supported the position statement. Emphasizing the precise language of the position, the League leader said the board's vote did not endorse abortion directly and did not address the question of morality.⁶¹

Omaha League members were divided on the issue. According to Barba Edwards, the abortion issued caused a "bloodbath . . . the League lost a hundred members locally because of the League's stand on abortion, especially people that were Catholic or a part of the Christian right . . . they did not understand this was a constitutional thing we were addressing."⁶²

⁶⁰ Wagner Interview.

⁶¹ Omaha World-Herald, January 20, 1983, LWVGO archive.

⁶² Edwards Interview; Membership figures indicate the League membership dropped from 199 members in 1982 to 129 in 1984 (taken from League of Women Voters Yearbooks, 1982, 1984).

Wagner recalled that the League also gained members over the issue ". . . because we were not radical, rampant, or raving, people could feel at home with this issue . . . we have a lot of very active members who are extremely pro-life, but it is like everything else -- you can't become so narrow -- Leaguers are not narrow, we are not one issue people."⁶³

Throughout the 1980s and early 1990s the Omaha League has also studied public school financing; housing; filling a vacancy in the office of the mayor; the farm crisis; financing state and local government; school curriculum standards; methods of electing Douglas County Commissioners; hazardous waste management; crime, and the Douglas County Hospital. Most recently the League's energies have focused on studies of the juvenile justice system in Douglas County. The League's findings were published in a popular report entitled Johnny's In Trouble, in 1993.⁶⁴

In spite of all the different issues with which the League has been involved, the League still receives the most attention for its voter-related activities. Before each city/county election, the Omaha League publishes the Douglas County Voters Guide, a valuable reference report on the various candidates and issues scheduled to appear on the

⁶³ Wagner Interview.

⁶⁴ Reports on League activities found in the League of Women Voters Archives and League of Women Voters Yearbooks: 1980-1995.

ballot. The report is usually a several page tabloid on newsprint and includes brief statements detailing biographical information on candidates and their positions on selected issues.

As each election approaches, a chairperson is selected to organize the Voters Guide activities for the League. The chairperson then collects pertinent questions for each office and reviews these with the League's board of directors. The questions are then presented to the League membership and voted on. Once the questions are selected, they are sent to each of the candidates with clear instructions regarding a fifty-word limit and the deadline for returning their answers.

According to Ms. Edwards, "the statements are in the candidate's own words, although we try to get them not to dance around an issue . . . we don't edit them except for spelling errors, we don't correct their grammar. We restrict their statements to just fifty words. That's strictly enforced, although some of the incumbents never hit fifty words on their own in their lives."⁶⁵

Some 50,000 copies of the Voters Guide are distributed

⁶⁵ Omaha World-Herald, (undated) 1994, LWVGO archives.

In earlier years, the League coordinated their efforts with the Omaha World-Herald to put out the Voters Guide. However, the League parted ways with the newspaper over differences on how the candidates' answers are presented. The newspaper summarizes each candidate's answer and corrects his/her grammatical errors. Interview with Deborah Suttle.

to major supermarkets, libraries, high schools and universities. LWVGO members also continue to register voters at various locations throughout the city.

The Voters Guide and the numerous issues the League addresses each year takes a tremendous amount of labor to collect the research data, compile the reports, and take action on the issues. Furthermore, the League has never had a paid staff member organizing any of these league activities; instead, the organization has always successfully relied upon its members for this support.

In the 1970s, the issue of manpower began to become a concern for the League. "Traditionally women have had the spare time to be able to concern themselves and take up the areas of the League. Now we've come up with the situation of the working woman, and we're going to have to figure on paying for things rather than counting on a person's free valuable time."⁶⁶

In the 1990s, the League membership has actually increased, largely because of the aggressive membership campaign coordinated by Dorothy Dollis.⁶⁷ However, in spite of the membership increases, the volunteer base has

⁶⁶ Mrs. Emmajean Wupper as quoted in the Sun Newspapers, May 31, 1973 (clipping file), HSDC.

⁶⁷ In 1996, Dorothy Dollis won recognition from the national League for her efforts to increase League membership. Mrs. Dollis regularly invites potential members to her home for discussion on how the League works. She has also made specific attempts to bring in more elected officials and minority members of the community.

grown smaller.

Because of the shortage of volunteers, the League has found it necessary to decrease the number of issues it undertakes each program year. League members have found it helpful to share more of their tasks with other interested and supportive organizations in order to more efficiently accomplish their goals.

Has the League membership changed in recent years? Most League members would agree it has. Deborah Suttle has noticed a difference in the membership meetings, stating "its not just white hair and white faces anymore . . . we are an organization that reaches out to all segments of the community."⁶⁸ Other members indicated changes in the large number of working women who are now members of the League. Mrs. Emmajean Wupper, four-time past president, agrees that the League has opened itself to a larger part of the community; however, she contends that the most noticeable membership changes came in 1974 when men were invited to become voting members of the League.⁶⁹ Today the League has four male members.

During the League's seventy-fifth year in 1995, it celebrated with events that provided an opportunity to highlight its important accomplishments as well as to look

⁶⁸ Suttle Interview, August 7, 1996.

⁶⁹ Wupper Interview; Omaha World-Herald, February 20, 1974; February 12, 1980 (clipping file), HSDC.

ahead. To commemorate these achievements, the Omaha League held a luncheon honoring women who had been elected to office and organized a "March on the Mall" that was attended by more than 500 people. On the State League's anniversary date, June 14, 1995, the LWVGO held a press conference in front of the old Blackstone Hotel, the site of the first state League meeting in Omaha in 1920, and a reception at the League's new office in the Center Mall, 42nd and Center Streets.

In looking back over the seventy-five years of the League's history, it is apparent its programs and priorities have changed; however, the organization has remained true to its basic purposes:

- a. to establish positions on public policy through member participation and agreement;
- b. to take concerted actions that secure public policies consistent with League positions;
- c. to enhance citizen participation in federal, state and local government decisions; and
- d. to increase citizen participation in the election process.⁷⁰

According to Barba Edwards, League president during its seventy-fifth anniversary, "in the beginning the League's goal was to get people to vote and to educate them to vote. I would say now the League is looking at the same issues, but it has a different perspective on those issues."⁷¹ As

⁷⁰ Idea, 8.

⁷¹ Edwards Interview.

the League looks ahead at voter issues, it will embark on a new strategy called "Initiative to Renew Democracy." "As we look at the next century we have to look at the apathy and the distrust in government," said Edwards. "We have a lot to do now but pretty similar to what we did in the 1920s . . . in making people know they do have a system and we have to get people to register and to get them to vote."⁷²

Deb Suttle, former League President and chair of this new initiative, agrees that for the League to thrive and meet the current needs, it must first attack the problem of the "acrimonious atmosphere" surrounding politicians and the political process:

It is our government after all and we cannot show such contempt for our government . . . I believe that the controversies and a lot of the things going on right now are due to negative campaigning and bashing whoever is running . . . we really need to put the civil back into civility and try to work with different groups . . . to help them understand that the only way they are going accomplish anything or to be able to do anything -- is to work with the system, . . . we want to work with politicians and see campaigns that take the high-road . . . we also believe that the electorate is just as cantankerous as the politicians and because of that -- the respect has been lost for the government and respect has been lost for each other and we want do something about that.⁷³

The League of Women Voters has evolved from what it was in 1920 -- an experiment designed to help enfranchised women

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Interview by author with Deborah Suttle, March 1, 1996.

carry out their new responsibilities -- to what is today: a unique, nonpartisan organization that is a recognized force in shaping public policy and in promoting citizen participation at all levels of government.

While this thesis has attempted to highlight the unique activities of the League of Women Voters of Greater Omaha, time and space limitations prevent a comprehensive treatment of the League's activities. But the story of the League is here, and hopefully the major thrust of its work has been made clear.

No matter what issue the League members took on, whether it was garbage and trash disposal, assisting the war efforts, the Omaha City Charter, or the ERA, League members knew that their work was critically important. Our daily lives are affected by the good work that these individuals carry out. At election time, they are invaluable. They are the only unbiased source the voter has as a reference to make his/her decision before casting a ballot. These women devote many hours of time each week to insure that we have as efficient and responsible a government system as is possible and that we wisely select our elected officials, regardless of their political party.

The LWVGO has also remained part of our political conscience for seventy-five years, taking on issues of racial equality, equal opportunity, environmental concerns, rights for women and children, and other social questions

with vigor. Yet, amidst all that enthusiasm, is a professional, unbiased, and thorough analysis of every situation that is undertaken.

There is probably no other organization that devotes itself so completely to expanding citizen participation and responsibility as the League. The League knows how to effect change in the social and political structure of Omaha through citizen education and concerted political action. The complexities of life in our city make the League an increasingly "needed" organization.

APPENDIX A
**League of Women Voters
 Presidents (1920-1995)¹**

1920: Mrs. Charles J. Hubbard	
1921: Mrs. H.J. Bailey	1960: Mrs. Homer P. Smith (Florence)
1922: Mrs. H. J. Bailey	1961: Mrs. Homer P. Smith (Florence)
1923:	1962: Mrs. Homer P. Smith (Florence)
1924: Mrs. R.E. McKelvey	1963: Mrs. Bruce H. Stafford (Betsy)
1925/26/27:	1964: Mrs. Bruce H. Stafford (Betsy)
1928: Mrs. C.J. Howe (Horn?)	1965: Mrs. Milton G. Waldbaum (Mimi)
1929:	1966: Mrs. Milton G. Waldbaum (Mimi)
	1967: Mrs. Cecil A. Johnson (Harriet)
1930: Mrs. Harley G. Moorehead	1968: Mrs. Cecil A. Johnson (Harriet)
1931: Mrs. A.H. Felters	1969: Mrs. Ralph Taylor (Peg)
1932: Mrs. W.A. Willard	
1933: Mrs. W.A. Willard	1970: Mrs. Ralph H. Taylor (Peg)
1934: Mrs. J.H. Rhoads	1971: Mrs. Griffith Salisbury (Ricky)
1935: Mrs. W.E. Shafer (Ida)	1972: Mrs. Griffith Salisbury (Ricky)
1936: Mrs. W.E. Shafer (Ida)	1973: Mrs. D.G. Taylor (Diane)
1937: Mrs. C.K. Ross	1974: Mrs. D.G. Taylor (Diane)
1938: Mrs. C.K. Ross	1975:
1939: Mrs. Jack Abajian (Elizabeth)	1976: Mrs. W.M. Muse (Marlene)
	1977: Mrs. Wanda Blotcky
1940: Mrs. Deanne W. Carre	1978: Mrs. Andrea Kuhn
1941: Mrs. Deanne W. Carre	1979: Mrs. Sylvia Wagner
1942: Mrs. Deanne W. Carre	
1943: Mrs. Deanne W. Carre	1980: Mrs. Sylvia Wagner
1944: Mrs. Mary C. Hyde	1981: Mrs. Deanna Frisk
1945: Mrs. Mary C. Hyde	1982: Mrs. Deanna Frisk
1946: Mrs. Mary C. Hyde	1983:
1947: Mrs. Merrill J. Hewitt	1984: Mrs. Anne Binhammer
1948: Mrs. Merrill J. Hewitt	1985: Mrs. Nancy Shugrue
1949: Mrs. P.S. Carter (Isabel)	1986: Mrs. Carol Bryce
	1987: Mrs. Carol Bryce
1950: Mrs. P.S. Carter (Isabel)	1988: Mrs. Carol Bryce
1951: Mrs. Roy Marshall (Edna J.)	1989: Mrs. Carol McDonald
1952: Mrs. Roy Marshall (Edna J.)	
1953: Mrs. Walter Stephenson	1990: Mrs. Carol McDonald
1954: Mrs. Walter Stephenson	1991: Mrs. Deborah Suttle
1955: Mrs. George F. Owens	1992: Mrs. Deborah Suttle
1956: Mrs. George F. Owens	1993: Ms. Barba J. Edwards
1957: Mrs. Fred L. Wupper (Emmajean)	1994/95: Ms. Barba J. Edwards
1958: Mrs. Fred L. Wupper (Emmajean)	
1959: Mrs. Homer P. Smith (Florence)	

¹ Data from 1920-1940 is drawn from newspaper clippings and League archival records. Data from 1940-1995 is drawn from League of Women Voters Yearbooks, 1940-1995.

APPENDIX B
Local Program Agendas²

1950s

- 1952 Trash and Garbage Disposal in the Omaha Area
- 1953 Trash and Garbage
- 1954 Omaha's Existing City Charter
- 1955 Various Forms of City Government with a View Toward Revision of Omaha's Charter
- 1956 Court Procedures, Laws and the Juvenile Offender
- 1957 Omaha City Government and New Charter
- 1958 I. Omaha under New (1956) City Charter
 II. Proposals for "Omaha Plan"
- 1959 Douglas County Government and Interrelationships with Omaha City Government

1960s

- 1960 I. Douglas County Government
 II. Omaha's Sewer Systems
- 1961 I. Planning Needs of Omaha-Douglas County Area
 II. Comparison of Combined Local Governments in Other Areas
- 1962 I. Urban Redevelopment and Renewal
- 1963 I. Urban Renewal Programs and Evaluation of Same
 II. Metropolitan-Regional Cooperation Activities and Needs in the Omaha Area.
- 1964 I. Urban Renewal, Support of Proposals for UR Authority
 II. Omaha City Charter Review
- 1965 I. Urban Renewal Program Support
 II. Omaha City Charter Review, Evaluation of Proposed Changes
 III. Omaha Library Services and Needs
- 1966 I. Omaha City Charter Review, Support of Urgent Proposed Changes
 II. Omaha Library Services and Needs, Evaluation of Main Library requisites
- 1967 I. Continued Support of Efforts to Solve Metropolitan Problems on a regional basis and
 study of proposals for city-county cooperation.
 II. Study of Capital Improvements Planning and Programming for the City of Omaha.
- 1968-1969
 I. Evaluation of equality of opportunity for adequate housing in Omaha.
 II. Support of efforts to solve metropolitan problems on a regional basis.
 III. Support of plans for an adequate Library facility.
 IV. Support of a comprehensive urban renewal program.
 V. Support of the proposed amendments to the City Charter classified "urgent" by the
 Charter Study convention of 1965.

² Data about the 1950s is drawn from League archival records. Data drawn from 1960-1995 is drawn from League of Women Voters Yearbooks, 1960-1995.

1970s

1970-1971

- I. Police-Community Relations: Evaluation of Police-Community relations.
- II. Metropolitan-Regional Cooperation: Support of efforts to solve metropolitan problems on a regional basis.
- III. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- IV. Housing: Support of equality of opportunity for housing. Evaluation of measures to increase the supply of standard housing for low income families.
- V. Library: Support of plans for adequate new Main Library building and improved services of Omaha Public Library.
- VI. Urban Renewal: Support of a comprehensive urban renewal program for Omaha.

1971-1972

- I. City Council: Evaluation of the method of electing City Council members.
- II. Police-Community Relations: Evaluation of Police-Community relations; support of a workable grievance mechanism.
- III. Metropolitan-Regional Cooperation: Support of efforts to solve metropolitan problems on a regional basis; evaluation of Metropolitan Area Planning Agency.
- IV. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- V. Library Support: same.

1972-1973

- I. City Council: Support of a combination method of electing City Council members; continued evaluation of the present system.
- II. Police-Community Relations: Evaluation of Police-Community relations; support of a workable grievance mechanism for citizens' complaints and support for a six-month extension of the probationary period for police recruits.
- III. Metropolitan-Regional Cooperation: Support of efforts to solve metropolitan problems on a regional basis; evaluation of Metropolitan Area Planning Agency.
- IV. City-County Merger: Evaluation of study of feasibility of city-county merger in Omaha and Douglas County.
- V. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- VI. Library Support: same.

1973-1974

- I. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- II. City Council: Support of a combination method of electing City Council members; continued evaluation of the present system.
- III. Library Support: same.
- IV. Metropolitan-Regional Cooperation: Support of efforts to solve metropolitan problems on a regional basis. Support of better public information and education on MAPA activities, improved hiring practices, improvements in citizen participation in MAPA. Expanded to include the Riverfront Development Project.
- V. Police-Community Relations: Evaluation of Police-Community relations; support of a workable grievance mechanism for citizens' complaints and support for a twelve month probationary period.

1974-1975

- I. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- II. City Council: Re-evaluation of a combination method of electing City Council members; continued evaluation of the present system.

- III. Library Support: same.
- IV. Metropolitan-Regional Cooperation: Support of efforts to solve metropolitan problems on a regional basis. Support of better public information and education on MAPA activities, improved hiring practices, improvements in citizen participation in MAPA.
- V. Police-Community Relations: Evaluation of Police-Community relations; support of a workable grievance mechanism for citizens' complaints and support for a twelve month probationary period.

1976-1977

- I. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- II. Library Support: same.
- III. Education: Action to assist in the peaceful integration of the Omaha Public Schools.
- IV. Representative Government: Study of the structure and operation of Douglas County Government with emphasis on alternatives for the management of this government.
- V. Energy: Study of the rate structures commonly used to set utility prices and their relationship to energy conservation. Focus on weather and electricity rates in Omaha.

1977-1978

- I. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- IV. Representative Government: Action to change the structure of Douglas County Government to better meet the needs of its citizens. Favor home-rule. Support for an Elected Executive-Elected Council form of government.
- V. Energy: Action to change water rate structure to require those consumers who create peak summer demand to bear the cost. Study of utility rate structures.

1978-1979

- I. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- II. Representative Government: Action to change the structure of Douglas County Government to better meet the needs of its citizens. Favor home-rule. Support for an Elected Executive-Elected Council form of government.
- III. Utility Rates: Water Rates: Change in water rate structure that would require those consumers who create peak summer demand to bear that cost.
Electric Rates: Retention from a fuel adjustment clause which allows the utility to pass along to customer only those fuel costs which actually fluctuate.
- IV. Human Resources: Child Care: Evaluation of standards for day care services in Douglas County Family Court: Survey of need for Family Court and/or Supportive Services related to family law.

1979-1980

- I. Charter Amendments: Evaluation of proposed amendments to Omaha City Charter.
- II. Representative Government: Action to change the structure of Douglas County Government to better meet the needs of its citizens. Favor home-rule. Support for an Elected Executive-Elected Council form of government. Action toward representation on the City Council by district.
- III. Utility Rates: Water Rates: Change in water rate structure that would require those consumers who create peak summer demand to bear that cost.
Electric Rates: Retention from a fuel adjustment clause which allows the utility to pass along to customer only those fuel costs which actually fluctuate.
- IV. Human Resources: Child Care (same).

1980s

1980-1981

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. Representative Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. Utility Rates: Electric rates.
- IV. Human Resources: Child care.

1981-1982

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. Representative Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. Utility Rates: Electric rates.
- IV. Human Resources: Child care.
- V. Hazardous Wastes: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes.

1982-1983

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. Representative Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- IV. Public Utilities: Advertising.
- V. Rates: Electric rates.
- VI. Human Resources: Child care.
- VII. Hazardous Wastes: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes.

1984-1985

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. Representative Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- IV. Public Utilities: Advertising.
- V. Rates: Electric rates.
- VI. Human Resources: Child care.
- VII. Police Community Relations.
- VIII. Hazardous Wastes: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes and radioactive hazardous waste.

1985-1986

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. Representative Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. County Government: County Commissioners' elections by district.
- IV. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- V. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VI. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes and radioactive hazardous waste.
- VII. Greater Omaha Parks and Open Spaces.
- VIII. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care, police-community relations, and Omaha Metro Area Transit.

1986-1987

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. City Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. County Government: County Commissioners' elections by district.
- IV. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- V. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VI. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes and radioactive hazardous waste.
- VII. Greater Omaha Parks and Open Spaces.
- VIII. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care and police-community relations.

1987-1988

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. City Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. County Government: County Commissioners elections by district.
- IV. Voter Turnout in city elections study.
- V. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- VI. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VII. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes and radioactive hazardous waste.
- VIII. Greater Omaha Parks and Open Spaces.
- IX. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care.
- X. Police-Community Relations.

1988-1989 (Programs not listed in Yearbook.)

1989-1990

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. City Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. County Government: County Commissioners elections by district.
- IV. Voter Turnout in city elections study.
- V. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- VI. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VII. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes and radioactive hazardous waste.
- VIII. Greater Omaha Parks and Open Spaces.
- IX. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care.
- X. Police-Community Relations.

1990s

1990-1991

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. City Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. County Government: County Commissioner elections by district.
- IV. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- V. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VI. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes and radioactive hazardous waste.
- VII. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care and police community relations.

1991-1992

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. City Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. County Government: County Commissioner elections by district.
- IV. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- V. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VI. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes and radioactive hazardous waste.
- VII. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care and police community relations.

1992-1993

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. City Government.
- III. County Government: County Commissioners' elections by district.
- IV. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- V. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VI. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes, radioactive hazardous waste and parks and open spaces.
- VII. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care and police community relations.

1993-1994

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. City Government: City Council elections by district.
- III. County Government.
- IV. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- V. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VI. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes, radioactive hazardous waste and parks and open spaces.
- VII. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care, police community relations and corrections.

1994-1995

- I. Charter Amendment: Evaluation of amendments.
- II. City Government: Elections.
- III. County Government.
- IV. Financing: Use of tax revenues.
- V. Public Utilities: Advertising and rates.
- VI. Natural Resources: Non-radioactive hazardous wastes, radioactive hazardous waste and parks and open spaces.
- VII. Human Resources/Social Policy: Child Care, police community relations and juvenile justice.

APPENDIX C
League of Women Voters
Office/Meeting Locations (1920-1995)³

1920-1929	Office at People's Coal Company, 212 S. 17th
1930-1931	Meetings at Paxton Hotel
1932	Meetings at the Blackstone Hotel
1933-1938	Office at Aquila Court Building
1939-1947	Meetings held on the 5th floor of YWCA
1948	Meetings held at YWCA and Library
1949-1951	Meetings held at American Legion Club
1952-1962	Meetings scattered around Omaha
1963-1971	Office at 224 South 41st Street
1971-1978	Office at 5025 Grover Street
1978-1995	Office at 522 Elkwood Mall

³ Data is drawn from newspaper clippings, League archival records, and League of Women Voters Yearbooks, 1930-1995.

APPENDIX D
League of Women Voters
Membership Totals For Available Years between: 1920-1995⁴

1921:	19	1970:	249
1922:	119	1971:	269
		1972:	272
1939:	282	1973:	264
		1974:	296
1940:	182	1976:	234
1941:	176	1977:	148
1943:	131	1978:	201
1944:	131	1979:	192
1945:	128		
1946:	103	1980:	218
		1981:	220
1952:	83	1982:	199
1953:	125	1984:	129
1954:	180	1985:	156
1955:	159	1986:	154
1956:	193	1987:	142
1957:	189	1988:	150
1958:	191	1989:	141
1959:	218		
		1990:	168
1960:	241	1991:	193
1961:	254	1992:	207
1962:	224	1993:	214
1963:	229	1994/95	226
1964:	202		
1965:	238		
1966:	227		
1967:	245		
1968:	279		
1969:	274		

⁴ Data from 1920-1939 is drawn from newspaper clippings and League archival records. Data from 1940-1995 is drawn from League of Women Voters Yearbooks, (missing years: 1942, 1947, 1948, 1949, 1950, 1951, 1975, 1983).

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