

PRIDE IN OUR PAST

Presented by Idabelle Forker to Des Moines Women's Club October 2007 by
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It is usually easier to plan for the future if we understand the past. We are especially interested in our past since we are now celebrating 100 years here at Hoyt Sherman Place. Who were these early women? How did our club evolve?

We need to understand that when our club began in 1885 Des Moines had been incorporated for 35 years and had been Iowa's capitol for 28 years, although it would be another 11 years before the gold domed capitol building would be completed. The population was about 22,000. The most prominent mode of transportation was by horse and buggy. Of course, the streets were dirt, which made them dusty in dry weather and deep in mud during the wet seasons. Think of the problems you would have trying to keep your long skirts clean and dry. Commercial enterprises extended on the west side of the river from Court Ave. to Walnut and Locust and as far west as 12th Street.

The women of 1885 were eager to improve their lot in life as well as that of their families. There was a great deal of interest in the Women's Congress, which was held in Des Moines in early October 1885. JULIA WARD HOWE was the president and a main speaker. Some of the subjects covered at the meeting were "The Work of the World's Women", "The Need of Adjustment between Business and Social Life", "Women Physicians in Hospitals for the Insane", "The Religion of the Future", "Organized Work as Illustrated by the Methods of the W. C. T. U." "Justice and not Charity, the Need of the Day", plus others. These were all subjects of importance to women. The Women's Congress was also called the American Association of Women and later was named the National Association of Women. Perhaps that sounds more familiar.

A large number of Eastern ladies attended and also a large number came from Iowa and the west. Every northern state, except one, was represented in the audience on the first day of the Congress. The purpose of the gathering was to consider the present practical methods for securing for women, higher intellectual, moral, and physical conditions with a view to the improvement of all domestic and social relations. The meetings were held in the Congregational Church. The morning sessions were closed to those who were not members. However, the afternoon and evening sessions were open to the public. Elegant suppers were served. The Governor held a reception at the Capitol. The guests were housed in the homes of local women. Louisa M. Alcott was to have been the houseguest of Mrs. R. G. Orwig but was unable to come at the last minute.

One week after the end of this exciting meeting a group of local women met at the home of Dr. Margaret Cleaves to organize a club here in Des Moines. It was structured partially after the plan of the New England Women's Club of Boston. The club name was to be decided later. They decided to meet regularly from 1-4

P M on alternate Tuesdays. The Treasury already had \$350. which had been the proceeds of tickets sold at the door on the three evenings of the congress. Dr. Margaret Cleaves, who was a physician, was elected President. Two weeks later the women met again and chose THE DES MOINES WOMEN'S CLUB as their club's name and they also picked Mrs. Abdile as V.P., Mrs. S.M. Dickenson as Treasure, plus their board of directors. They read the bylaws of both the New England Women's Club of Boston and the New Century Club of Philadelphia. They incorporated items from both, but used the New England Club bylaws as a pattern.

The object of the club, borrowed from the Philadelphia group, was to "CREATE AN ORGANIZED CENTER OF THOUGHT AND ACTION AMONG WOMEN". Secondly, it was to furnish a quiet central place of meeting in Des Moines for the comfort and convenience of its members. The first bylaws also stated "Gentlemen may become associate members and shall be entitled to attend all the general meetings". The fee for membership and also associate membership was \$1.00 annually. There were 22 Charter members whose names are on a bronze plaque in the foyer of the Auditorium. Check it out. You will find two Doctors in the group, which is quite unusual for 1885.

Their order of work, or departments, was determined to be 1) Art and Literature, 2) Work, 3) Discussion and, 4) Education. Some of the early programs written and presented by members during their first year were most interesting. The very first one was by Mrs. Patchin in which she recommended a local association for the advancement of Art and the utility of such an association in Des Moines. That was really prophetic. Other programs were "Dress of Women," "Domestic Service," "Laws of Iowa and Property Rights of Women", "Nervous Strains on Girls", and "Necessity of teaching the laws of physiology and hygiene to the youth of the country with especial reference to the effects of narcotics on the human system," As a result of this program, a recommendation was drafted and sent to the legislature asking that the selling of cigars and tobacco to minors be prohibited. This was the first of many legislative suggestions made by the women and sent over to Iowa's governing body. Other interesting sounding titles from early "papers" included "Women in Politics", "History of Art", and "The Advisability of Hanging". Following the discussion period after this program an opinion vote was taken. All but one of those present voted FOR Capitol Punishment. Mrs. J. Wyman voted against it. Her reason being "capitol punishment is a relic of barbarism and if it proves the best way of enforcing the law, then we are not ready for it."

Would it interest you to know that the first Women's Club tea cost \$10.45? I don't know what our opening day tea cost this year, but I am sure it was considerably more than that. In June 1886, A Women's Exchange was discussed -to be more or less like a register for employable women as maids, housekeepers, nursemaids, etc. It would also be a place to market sewing, clothes, linens, etc, to be sold with the Exchange keeping 10% for expenses and 90% going to the maker. It would be an opportunity for ladies with special talents in sewing, cooking, etc. to market their talents and also to help the family income. About July 15, 1886, the exchange was

set up in a room in the Meek Block on the west side of Sixth Street, three doors south of Locust where all could bring and sell their handiwork. In three months time (by November) the home made breads coming from the Women's Exchange had such a reputation abroad that orders came regularly from Chicago. The exchange continued until about 1934. It certainly was an interesting way of helping a great many people.

Early meetings were in homes. But, it soon became necessary to find larger rooms. During the first 32 years, they met in 28 different locations. This included places such as: Des Moines Club parlors, Congregational Church, Savery Hotel, Central Presbyterian Church, Y.M.C.A., Plymouth Church, Good Templar's Hall, Yoeman Hall, Elks Club, Shrine Temple. . During a good part of that time they contracted with the YMCA to use space there as their clubrooms. At first it cost the club \$45. a month for their one afternoon a week.

In 1888, the women decided they simply MUST establish and maintain an Art Gallery in Des Moines. They felt this was a pressing need for the cultural growth of Des Moines. They then began an Art Fund Association Auxiliary for the purpose of raising funds with which to purchase Art. The bylaws of this auxiliary were included with those of the club in the club yearbook. Belonging to it required additional dues. The first thousand dollars raised came from a Mr. Gilbert. He had been approached for money for the building fund of the YMCA. He refused, but said he would help the women begin their art collection.

While a few small paintings had been given to the club, the first art to be purchased was obtained in 1893. I know some of you are familiar with the story of how Mesdames West, Windsor, and Clapp were commissioned by the club to go to Chicago to the Columbian Exposition. The responsibility of this mission must have felt heavy. They were to purchase art and to spend no more than \$331.40, which was the proceeds of an earlier project. Let me tell the story in the words of Mrs. James G. Day in her Historian report dated Sept 26, 1894. "They looked and they counseled together with artist and especially Lorado Taft who was a very well known Sculptor". Let me digress from this story a moment to tell you that Lorado Taft also played a very "encouraging role" in the lives of Fred and Mabel Torey. Mable Torey sculpted two of our more recent art acquisitions. This just proves we live in a very small world. . Back to our three Women's Club ladies." They admired a beautiful bust of DIANA in marble and could hardly give it up. True it was marble and its price within the limit, but. It was not ALL of DIANA. They continued their work with Mr. Taft. He suddenly halted before the beautiful statue of Joan d' arc, an exact copy, in bronze, of the marble statue in the Louvre, and as he contemplated the pose, the absorbing interest, the devotion and patriotic purpose of the peasant girl, he remarked with emphasis, 'Well, I guess you have met your fate' AH! The committee had seen it before and admired it, but a bronze could not take the place of a marble statue. Mrs. West, with her usual apt decision and superior good taste, at once exclaimed, "Yes, we will take this. IN MARBLE. "We want one exactly like the one in the Louvre for our souvenir for the Des Moines Women's Club' the

agent said. Madam, the price of this size in marble will be exactly \$1,000.' She drooped and was sad and her bankrupt expression of countenance was not assumed, but was real and was there. She seriously thought of that hard earned \$331.40 to be expended on an art nucleus for her beloved home city and wondered how small an art nucleus could be and live. After a prosaic and meditative pause, she came down from her pedestal and said meekly said, "We will not take the marble, beautiful as it must be!" So, they went again and again to become acquainted with Joan d'arc and finally decided to make this beautiful bronze statue the souvenir of the World's Fair and the nucleus of the prospective art collection. It is a small reproduction, in bronze, of Chapu's masterpiece in the Luxemburg Gallery. From the price of nearly \$350, the agent made a generous reduction. The duty of \$100 was rebated because the statue was for a public benefit, and to this the committee was required to certify. 9 "Then came the irrepressible West, requesting that the board allow the further sum of \$50 and stating that with this sum, plus the amount remaining unexpended from the original amount given them, the DIANA could also be secured. The board did allow the additional \$50 with great pleasure; the committee went to buy the bust of Diana. However, she was disfigured on the cheek opposite the audience, resulting from a flaw in the marble. WELL, that would never do! Nothing short of perfection would answer. So, an order was given for the statue to be delivered directly from Rome " which it was in exactly one year. Diana was the work of Ernest Gagreri, an exact representation of the Diana in the Louvre, and is of heroic size and of the purest Carrara Marble and its value was \$300. At first both pieces were located in the city library. Now, of course Diana resides on the mezzanine and Joan de arc is in the foyer .

C.E. Baldwin, then a local artist who later suggested we call it "A Fantasy" instead, called the first picture purchased by the club "The Dancing Girl". I believe we paid \$30 for it. It now hangs in the dining room. Look for the dancing girl in the yellow dress. It is a lovely little picture. In 1895, when Baldwin was ready to leave Des Moines and return to the art colonies of New York City, the Women's Club, along with the board of the Iowa society of fine arts invited Charles Atherton Cumming to come to Des Moines and take over the struggling Des Moines academy of Arts that Baldwin had been running. This proved to be a brilliant move whether the women realized it or not at the time.

It would take a series of programs to tell about all the art purchased by the club over the years. As members and friends of the club realized the quality of the collection being formed, more and more gifts of paintings and art objects were made as well.

Art has been a top priority through all of the club years. However, other kinds of things were important as well. In about 1895, money was given to the Home for the Aged and also the river park fund. In 1896, again to raise money for the Home for the Aged the ladies did something that really made the town sit up and take notice. They ran the streetcars for a day. Each lady wore her middie blouse and a

great big smile as she took her turn doing a "man's job". There was a motorman along on each car in case a car lost its trolley line. The papers were full of descriptive articles and cartoons about this event.

Other significant projects that were both interested and involved the women included: A Chautauqua, A "Fete" held at Waveland Park for children. They placed books in the streetcar waiting room. They worked for the Children's Home, the Free Kindergarten, Social Settlement and the Y.W.C.A. They also helped with a Women's Suffrage Convention, swept the streetcars, cleaned alleys and neighborhoods and interested people in building a public library. They enthusiastically encouraged mothers to become involved in the schools. And, of course, these early women worked and saved for their own clubhouse.

In 1902, "it was moved and carried that a committee look into building a house". They had to decide whether to build a gallery for their works of art or to house them in the City Library. They were temporarily placed in the State Capitol Building. They decided to do nothing until they had raised \$10,000. Oh yes, they also voted that they did not want an old house already built. We do sometimes change our minds, don't we?

Also in 1902, the club presented the first public exhibition in Des Moines, exclusively made up of the work of a Des Moines artist. There were 23 paintings done by Mr. C.A. Cumming in Brittany plus "Summer Afternoon" which we had purchased from him in 1896. This testimonial exhibition was planned as a token of appreciation of his work. "Summer Afternoon" is now hanging here in the Byers Room.

Our club minutes of April 1904 tell us that Mr. Cumming was empowered to purchase a picture at the Louisiana Purchase exhibition in St. Louis. He chose Guinier's "Entering the Harbor." The friendly and cooperative relationship we had with Mr. Cumming was of real value to both Mr. Cumming and to the club. Stories about him and his work could be the subject of another program.

The Sherman Heirs sold the property to the city in 1907 for \$14,500. Des Moines turned around and gave it to the DMWC on a long-term lease for \$1. a year. Mrs. W.F. Mitchell was President for two years during the acquisition, addition, and settling in period. The contract for leasing "Sherman Place" was approved on May 25, 1907. On July 15, we accepted the bid of Mrs. Mitchell's husband, W.F. Mitchell, to erect "a new building" (addition, actually) and repair the old one, omitting the cellar under the new construction, for a cost of \$4,560.00. On Aug. 2 the board accepted a bid for painting both the old and new parts for \$65,00. The shingling of the roof and new gutters cost \$331.80. The Hot Air Heating cost \$475.00. Remember, fireplaces had heated the home only. The board voted for Opalescent glass for the windows of the "Auditorium" as they were calling Gallery. Five hundred chairs were ordered. We have a picture of the first board meeting out on the front steps. This was before the building was quite ready for use. The first meeting inside Hoyt Sherman Place was

on Oct. 30, 1907. The dedication ceremony was held on Dec. 7, 1907. Then they had a large open house on Jan. 1, 1908 for the public, which attracted about 500 guests. The club received house-warming gifts from numerous local businesses. One example is the wood-backed settee now at the foot of the east stairway, across from the cloak room by the lower east door, which was a gift from Davidson Bros.

As the programs branched out to include more outside speakers, they had some really big names like: Jane Addams, from Hull House in Chicago, James Whitcomb Riley, Mdme. Scheumann-Heink, Amelia Earhart, (1933), Thomas Hart Benton (1935), Ruth Bryan Owen, daughter of William Jennings Bryan and minister to Denmark (1934), Otis Skinner, actor (1935), Drew Pearson and Agnes de Mill (1940), Jan Struther (author of Mrs. Minever, 41), Margaret Bourke White, 43, Hal Holbrook, Ogden Nash, Amy Vanderbilt, Joffery Ballet, Roger Williams (standing room only for this one). His mother was a member at that time.

Back in 1910, the club members embarked on a most interesting fundraiser. The big question being asked was "What are you going to do to earn your dollar". They had a goal of \$1,000 to aim for. Mrs. Earnest Brown, president, earned \$1.80 by selling eggs and cottage cheese. Other ladies sold popcorn (buttered, salted, or sugared); made dusting caps, picturesque, everyday dusting caps; sold hand lotion; pumpkin pies; Orange Marmalade; Oatmeal Cookies; tatted doilies; baked beans; hair oil; shoveled snow; shoe shining; provided table scraps for chicken feed; plain and fancy sewing; tended furnaces; gave recitals; gave French and bridge lessons; and fortune telling. By the way, this fortune-telling lady earned more money if she DIDN'T tell the past, but only predicted the future. One woman admitted she was paid for ironing her husband's shirt, and then he gave her more if she promised NEVER to do it again. The total earned in this project was \$523.25. The highest amount earned was \$100.00 and the second highest was \$20.50. We thought we had all the ideas for raising money. It looks like we could take lessons from some of our older "sisters."

1911 was the Club's Silver Anniversary year. This was also the year that the Byers Art treasures were promised to the club. They realized they would have to build an additional gallery to house them. They also needed to expand by building a 1400 seat auditorium. They began to raise money by dividing the members into teams according to the year they joined the club. They took over theaters, operated street cars, gave bridge parties, sold every kind of saleable object, trudged thru laundries and other industrial plants at so much a head, and even sponsored a concert by the St. Louis Symphony.

The building project was delayed because of WWI. But, in preparation, the lease was renegotiated for 99 years. Then \$60,000 in bonds were sold by Des Moines Bankers and the Greater Des Moines committee. The only security behind the bonds was the integrity of the club members. The 1400 seat Auditorium and the Byers Room were completed and dedicated in January 1923. By the way, we had the first complete lighting board in any auditorium in Des Moines.

In 1930, a most interesting sounding event was held. It was a Gridiron luncheon at which 800 were served. . All political and club celebrities were warned to wear rubbers and mackintoshes and to carry umbrellas as protection from the "real soaking" prepared for them.

In 1931, the History and Travel department displayed a "Family Album." The club post was revived, memories rekindled, friends of yesterday haunted, and dreams came true with fleeting glimpses of friends.

In 1932, the club endorsed the Des Moines Symphony by buying 20 tickets to a concert. These tickets were given to L.E. Watters to be given to worthy boys and girls to hear the orchestra concert. That same year the club won Sweepstake, popularity and daily prizes in a table setting contest between 5 local clubs at Younkers store.

In November 1934 there was a Festival of Thanksgiving to celebrate the end of the bonded indebtedness from the building project. They proved the business men of Des Moines had been right about the integrity of our club members by paying off the \$60, 000 indebtedness in eleven years.

For several years a very professional-sounding chorus of about 50 voices presented programs for other public and private groups as well as for Women ' s Club programs. Our current chorus may be smaller, but I'm sure it sounds professional, too.

In January 1939, a letter was sent to the City Council approving and urging the marking of Iowa's most historic site at the junction of the Raccoon and Des Moines Rivers by building a replica of the old fort, surrounded by a suitable park to be used as a museum and community center. The suitable park there now is not exactly what they envisioned, but their action may have played its part.

In the early 40's each monthly bulletin carried a "picture of the Month" plus a few interesting tidbits about it. We also exhibited this "picture of the month" under special lighting at the east end of the Auditorium lobby. I doubt if we could actually move the paintings today, but it might be fun reviving the idea of featuring a painting each month in our Bulletin. The art committee should discuss this possibility.

During the 1947-48-club year, we received the dining room furniture, which had belonged to the Sherman Family. Mrs. Arthur Sherman, Hoyt's daughter-in-law, arranged for its return. She was the only member of the Sherman family to ever belong to the D.M.W.C.

In 1949, we had so many members; it became necessary to start a Sandwich bar to handle the overflow at the club luncheons. About this same time in our club history

there were many organized classes, which were being well attended. They covered sewing, metal work, art, cooking, choral and drama groups, etc.

In 1954, we spend \$31, 000 to redecorate the auditorium with sage green curtains, new spots and speakers and new carpet in the Foyer, mezzanine, stairs and aisles. The following year a new light control board back stage was installed.

About this time a Club Cook book was published. We have had several over the years. You may recall that several luncheons have been planned using some old favorites from our cookbooks.

In the mid 50's we began to feel the need for more parking. Fewer members were taking public transportation and more were driving cars. It was during the '65-66 club year that we borrowed \$51,000 at 5½% interest. With this they purchased 7 houses and 1 vacant lot of the east side of 15th Street to be cleared for a new parking lot. The project was hardly finished when we learned that the city wanted to relocate 15th Street. That meant going right through our parking lot. There were many sleepless nights and added gray hairs due to this problem, but when it was over, we had a new, larger parking lot and we didn't have to cross the street to get to it. It didn't take very many years to pay of this indebtedness either. I remember the day the papers were burned on a large metal tray on the stage of the auditorium. What a thrill.

We are approaching modern times in the life of our Club here at Hoyt Sherman Place. Time does now permit naming all of the worthwhile projects that have taken place. But, we must mention the beginning of our Foundation in 1994. Then, for the first time, the public was approached for funds for restoration projects. Up till then the club and its members had been responsible for all expenses. The city turned the ownership of the property over to the foundation and the Women's Club added the parking lot and all the art and furnishings.

Before I close, I want to back up and give you a few facts that you may find interesting. For the first four years, the dues were \$1 a year. Then in 1889, the dues doubled to \$2. In 1895, it grew to \$3 where it stayed until 1901 when it jumped to \$5 a year. In 1920 the dues became \$7. and rose to \$10 in 1924. It wasn't until 1949 that dues became \$12.50. In 1950, dues were \$15 a year and in 1958 they went up to \$20. You can see that as times changed the club dues have reflected the increased costs of everything we encounter.

As the club flourished, the membership grew. Although it started with 22 charter members, by the time it was 10 years old there were 198. By the time 20 years had passed there were 387 members and by 1910, there were 534 members. The high point in club membership was reach in 1955 when we had over 1600 members. Since these high membership years we know our world has changed with a much higher percentage of working women. Large shares of our members today do not join until they have retired from the work force.

We recognize a difference in the lifestyle and needs of women today compared with the women who started our club back in 1885, and we're trying to meet some of these needs. And yet we find a surprising number of things which have remained the same. I think we can all get a shot of enthusiasm as we learn about some of the activities of the past. It should increase our pride in who we were and what we are becoming. Let's bless our enthusiastic and very active older sisters.