

The Des Moines Women's Club in 1917 & 18
Florence Cowles- President

From the founding of the Des Moines Women's Club in 1885- down the long, peaceful years to 1917, all efforts of the club members had been bent on self-improvement , on stimulating thought, and particularly on striving to make the club a valuable art center for Des Moines. Many art exhibitions had been hung in the little gallery, innumerable lectures had been listened to, and valuable pictures had been purchased.

Then, as the club grew in size and prominence a great need developed. The membership had grown to nearly 900. On open days the small auditorium was crowded to capacity. A new, large and handsome auditorium was seen to be an absolute necessity.

As a consequence, a building committee had been named, and had become, perhaps the most alive and active of all our committees. After much hoping and praying and planning and intense effort, the new longed-for auditorium seemed to be just around the corner. Money had at last been raised, plans and specifications were ready for the contractor and the sky was rosy.

Then, almost overnight, we were plunged in the World War!

Almost before we realized what had happened, out of our membership of 883, 132 women in the club had close relatives in the service. Eighteen of our members had husbands who had gone to the war. Eighty-four had seen their sons march away. Five members had bade good-bye to grandsons, six to brothers, and nineteen sons-in-law had enlisted!

All thoughts of a new auditorium went with the wind! Patriotic service was our one purpose in life. Camp Dodge was established and was soon full of officers and soldiers. Anxious women everywhere were feverishly rolling bandages, knitting socks and sweaters, making comfort bags, packing boxes and raising money for patriotic funds, and the members of the Des Moines Women's Club were in it all-heart and soul.

A War Emergency Committee was formed, with Mrs. L.C. Kurtz as Chairman. Mrs. Geo. Kraetch, Mrs. H.L. Carrell- who had headed the Building Committee so efficiently and whose only son had gone to the war- Mrs. Elmer Louks and Mrs. J.K. Elwell were co-chairmen, with seventy-one members as auxiliary, all good women and true. Meetings were held to plan war work in all the various departments and ramifications of the Club.

One Red Cross unit met in the Club House to cut and stitch shirts and pajamas for the boys overseas, many taking garments home to finish.

The club house was opened for many teas for wives of officers at Camp Dodge.

The Art Department conducted a poster contest for all Iowa artists, the subject being "Saving and Serving with Hoover". Mrs. R.H.Delmege conducted this contest, much interest developed and many posters were entered.

The "Home and Education" served Thrift lunches on regular club days and we discussed such things as "meatless menus"- "Paper bag cooking" and how to manage meals without sugar.

The Literature Department- feverishly went on raising money for the "French War Orphan Fund", gave a "novelty entertainment" in West High auditorium where they could charge club members admission.

The Philosophy and Service Department ventured to furnish us with a lecture on "The Philosophic Basis of the War"- but it was scarcely listened to by women whose husbands and sons were in the trenches- or might be- for all they knew.

On Club Welfare Day the women brought their Red Cross sewing and knitting and ate a Thrift picnic luncheon during which Mrs. F.O. Green presented the club with a large service flag.

We bought Liberty Bonds and war saving stamps, helped support "Furlough Homes" in France, made comfort bags for soldiers overseas, and with breaking hearts we tried to take part in community singing, led by Mrs. Eddy.

Edwin Markham read to us on one Open Day- and Witter Bruner on another, but with Camp Dodge at our door and the dark shadow of "flu" developing- we cared little for poets and poems – no matter how fine. Likewise, a cartoon drawn "overthere" by Bairnsfather was more appealing to this group of former patrons of art, than the finest painting by Friesseke.

And thus, with feverish dread and fear always tugging at our hearts, we went thru the motions of trying to "run a club"- supposed to be devoted to "Culture" and "Self-improvement", each of which now seemed to be a hollow mockery. Yes- we tried to keep the home first burning so we went thru the motions of holding the meetings and electing new officers and passing on the leadership to other trembling hands- and our administration of 1917-18 was over.

May such a year never come to our beloved club again! Nor to our country!

Florence Call Cowles
President 1917-18