

## History of the LWV of Cooperstown

### THE LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS OF THE COOPERSTOWN AREA

The times were turbulent at the end of the 1960s with riots in major cities, the recent assassinations of Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, the ongoing war in Vietnam, and the growing concern for our environment. The women of Cooperstown, New York, a quiet village of about 2,400 people, wondered, "How could we affect change?" In the fall of 1969 the Cooperstown Women's Club invited Alice Gordon of the LWV Oneonta to speak to them about the League. Shortly after two of those in attendance approached Ann Rath, whom they knew had belonged to the League in Alexandria, Virginia, and said, "How about forming a League here?"

No sooner said than done! A nucleus of interested women formed a steering committee chaired by Peggy Herman; by February 1970 the group's minutes noted: "The 22 people present voted that they did wish to get started." Dues, set by the State League at \$7.50 plus \$1.00 for the local organization, were to be collected by April 1 and a nominating committee was named, "to draw up a slate, to be presented at the next meeting, of five women to constitute a Board, offices to be arrived at as all becomes more clear."

A board was elected and was composed of Peggy Herman, chairman; Marge Roberts and Alice Spinney, vice-chairmen; Jane Huber, Secretary; and Irene Williams treasurer. During the ensuing weeks, study groups on the Environment (Water), Human Resources, China, and state finances were organized. By the following April, membership had increased to 32, interesting programs were presented by the various study groups, and the Community Survey had been completed.

Cooperstown is a small community, and the League of Women Voters of New York State thought the best approach would be for the League to become a unit of the LWVNYS. In the minutes of June 9, 1971, Ann Rath reported, "...in order to become a full-fledged League, membership of at least 40 people is required of a local League. Cooperstown League members are, in effect, members-at-large of the State League, and as individuals, they may take political action on various League issues. However, the Cooperstown Unit as a whole is limited in terms of the political action it can take because of its status." As time went on, members were not happy about this status—they wanted to be active in the community and felt it unfair that dues collected went directly to LWVNYS. After several meetings with Robbi Willenkim of the LWVNYS, the Cooperstown Unit decided in February 1972 to become a Provisional League and not remain a Unit.

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Enthusiasm was high, and by the third Annual Meeting, on April 24, 1972. There were 54 members, bylaws were adopted, and the geographical area for the LWV Cooperstown had been chosen—the Towns of Hartwick, Middlefield, Otsego, and Springfield and the village of Cooperstown that were connected by the Cooperstown School District and Otsego Lake, the centerpiece of the area. The “Cooperstown Area” would be these four towns and a village. By the end of the annual meeting, Ann Rath had been elected president and Mrs. Robbi Willenkim, representing the LWNYS announced that, all requirements having been fulfilled, the group was officially the Provisional LWV of the Cooperstown Area.

Reviewing the minutes of those early years, one is struck by how different times were. A notice from the state League in April 1970 requested a list of board members, providing these instructions: “Name (Give husband’s name or initials and list alphabetically).” The Provisional LWV of the Cooperstown Area’s minutes for October 12, 1971, included the following “The board agreed that in future, the newsletter would be addressed to each member in her given name.”

After four years of hard work, our “Know Your Town Study” was completed and published, the League was actively supporting the Equal Rights Amendment, and the “Futures Committee” was planning ahead for the year 2000. Finally, on October 29, 1974, we officially became the League of Women Voters of the Cooperstown Area. Serendipitously, 1974 was the same year that the LWVUS had decided at convention to admit men as members, and in our October 1974 newsletter the newly formed Leagued welcomed new members, including Mr. Gerald Bushnell.

A look at the calendars in the League bulletins over the ensuing years shows that the League members held candidates’ nights and voter registration drives, and studied issues. Members looked at village planning, women and the law, healthcare, financing education in New York state, meeting basic human needs, alternatives to incarceration, education, reproductive rights, judicial reform, cross endorsements in elections, clean air and clean water, public authorities, and county government and leadership. In addition to all these studies, the League updated “Know Your Town,” and republished it in 1986 as *Four Towns and a Village*. As a testament to the community’s support of the League, the publication of *Four Towns* was underwritten by Victory Markets/Great American of Norwich, N.Y.

## **Caring for the Environment**

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The first Earth Day in the United States was held in April 1970, and that cause was dear to the hearts of many of those building this new League. That legacy would be a driving force behind League projects for years to come, continuing to the present. At the time of the LWVCA's founding, recycling was unheard of. New York did not enact its bottle deposit system until 1983, so all no-deposit bottles and the new plastic and aluminum containers simply became part of the waste stream.

In its beginning days the League was a unit of the LWVNYS. Members, were eager to make a difference, and wanted to focus on the environment, specifically recycling glass. The Natural Resources study group was undaunted when told by the state League that as a unit of the LWVNYS, we were only supposed to study—not take action. The League approached the Otsego County Conservation Association (OCCA), who agreed to act as a co-sponsor, with most of the work and enthusiasm coming from the League. Excitement was high when members were promised a freight car, placed near the train terminal, for the collection of glass. The plan was simple—collect the glass, sort by color, and crush it, and once the car was full, send it to a recycling center. The project was a success, but did encounter some difficulties. Although quantities of glass had been collected, the freight car was two weeks late in arriving and by the time it was in place, school spring vacation was at hand and the annual trek to Myrtle Beach and other venues to the south was on. One perceives a somewhat desperate note in a plea by Ann Rath for “anyone with any time to please stop by the center and help crush glass.”

What to do with our county's solid waste became a pressing issue because of the imminent closing of local landfills. The League continued to be a leader in recycling in Cooperstown and the surrounding area. Once again with support from OCCA and under the enthusiastic guidance of League members Dottie Hudson and Martha Clarvoe and the Natural Resources Committee, the League began holding recycling days for newsprint, bottles, and cardboard. The Natural Resources Committee reached out to the community, meeting with local schools and with community groups to explain how to set up a household for recycling. League members volunteered to be recycling households to test the feasibility and management of household recycling. Participants kept track of their “trash,” separating real trash from all recyclables and providing an idea of how much a typical household could pull from the waste stream.

Illustrating to doubters the willingness of individuals and families to recycle, on a cold Saturday in January 1991 more than 15 tons of mixed paper was brought to the town landfill.

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Another collection was set for May 1991, which resulted in 320 carloads, 22 tons—of mixed paper. Six months later, the transfer stations in Cooperstown and Oneonta were regularly accepting newsprint and mixed paper for recycling.

In 1989, much to the dismay of the League and despite its strong opposition, Otsego County became part of MOSA, the Montgomery, Otsego, Schoharie Authority. The League had concerns about public authorities in general, but in particular believed that “a program of waste reduction, reuse, and recycling is the most environmentally sound and least expensive choice for solid waste management in Otsego County.”

Sadly, these doubts about MOSA were soon realized. By the time MOSA was up and running, recycling had become part of the culture in the community, and Otsego County recycled more than any of the other counties in the authority. Because of the county’s success with recycling, there was less waste going to the landfill and the county’s tipping fee increased because it was not producing the guaranteed amount of waste. There were even calls to end recycling. The League pushed on and each year lobbied MOSA to add one more item to its recyclable list. Later, there were special hazardous waste, battery, and tire recycling days.

The League’s Environmental Shopper Committee awarded certificates to local businesses in recognition of their environmentally friendly practices. The League had a regular column in the *Freeman’s Journal* and often the topic was on the environment. Victory Markets and the Great American (which was the only supermarket in the area) in 1989 agreed to stop the use of plastic bags in its stores. The committee also organized a “Swap and Save Our Environment” program, posting a list in the library of items available for reuse such as Styrofoam peanuts, bubble packs and such.

Environment-sensitive actions continued with member Martha Clarvoe’s long-term effort to outlaw barrel burning and to inform the public about the MOSA proposal and its subsequent management. Martha knew and understood these issues well, and her contributions and knowledge were recognized when the county appointed her to serve as its representative on the MOSA board.

### **The League and the Local Schools**

The Cooperstown School District is one of the primary threads weaving our small community together. Three of the four towns that were part of the original catchment area for the LWV Cooperstown are part of the district. One of the first studies undertaken by the League concerned education. Adopted on September 29, 1979, the position supported “increasing

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communication between the school and the community.” At the time, there was not any community-school group and little was done by the school to reach out to the community in practical ways. After studying the issue, the League adopted a new position that supported “disseminating basic information about the school ...to all parents and interested residents.” Based on these recommendations, the Cooperstown School-Community Association was formed. Over time, this group evolved into the present-day PTO. Within a few years, the school committed to publishing and distributing a newsletter to all residents and a comprehensive annual calendar that includes important dates and outlines many school policies and procedures. The League regularly over the years sponsored lunch meetings with school board members to discuss the annual budget. Several League members also ran for school board. Most important, the League has held candidates’ debates for the Cooperstown School District every year in which there were contested seats and regularly organizes voter registrations at the Cooperstown High School and surrounding local schools. For the past eighteen years, the League also worked with the local schools to coordinate student participation in Students Inside Albany.

## **LWV Cooperstown Area and the LWV New York State**

The LWV Cooperstown members have provided leadership to the state League as well. League member Kathy Lloyd pushed forward a state study on Alternatives to Incarceration, which resulted in the LWNYS position. Member Mary von Ziegesar served as state public relations chair, and Joyce Hickling worked with LWNYS on special projects including the development of a Carrie Chapman Catt collectible doll and was later named editor of the state *Voter*.

## **Keeping Going in Difficult Times**

To accomplish all of these activities, members fund-raised in every way they could. There were George parties (sadly, there is no written record of what exactly a “George Party” was), bake sales, barbecue dinners, casserole and pie sales, and just plain asking. But it was all hard work. In 1986, we introduced our major “fun” raiser, the annual Winter Doldrums party for members—especially those new to the League—and supporters. Held in the midst of winter, it provides a respite from the gray and gloom when all anyone wants is spring.

The League was busy and membership was strong, but looking back, the first glimpses of what would result in a crisis appeared in the April 1992 issue of our bulletin, *Update*. “When

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interested members met on February 12, 1992, to discuss program planning for the coming year, one message was clearly heard—there is an acute need to scale down our action priorities for the 1992-1993 year. At a time when the Nominating Committee is finding candidates for our local League board in short supply, the members present that night faced the reality of what can happen when a League board feels overextended.”

In the spring of 1994, although membership was a strong 127 members, the League called a meeting to discuss the fact that we did not have a full slate of officers for the upcoming year. We were not having a crisis of membership, but a crisis of leadership. A task force met and managed to produce a full slate of officers, with Ellen Tillapaugh taking over the presidency. The League managed to fill leadership positions for the next few years, but at the 2001 annual meeting there again was no candidate for president and the responsibilities of the president were distributed among the board members. The board reported, “After brainstorming ...the board has chosen to narrow the focus of League activity this year to the membership’s core interests: Voter Service and Natural Resources. [But] even this narrow focus will be impossible to cover without your help.”

An annual report from that time states, “the League has been affected at all levels as more of our members join the work force, with less time for outside/volunteer activities. Adversity may have diminished our numbers but not our spirit. A few corners have been cut [our bulletin, *Update*, ceased publication] but our purpose has remained the same, our work and influence as effective as ever.”

In August 2003 the League held a “Call for Help Meeting,” with LWVNYS President Martha Kennedy and the LWV Oneonta to discuss the possibility of dissolving or combining Leagues. There was sufficient response from members, however, to keep the League going. In fact, our members along with the LWV Oneonta worked hard to assure that our county adopted Optical Scan Voting. Members lobbied the county board, attended demonstrations of voting machines, wrote letters to the editor, and testified in support of the issue. It was a significant success story both for the voters of the county and for our League. Even in a challenging time, members rallied around an important issue.

By 2009, however, membership had dwindled to 40. Rather than bring about the end of our League, a thoughtful process downsized the our goals to match its member capacity. Voter Service activities continued, but the 2010 Annual Meeting was the last all-member activity for about three years.

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In 2013, a phone conference with a team of leaders from the LWVNYS galvanized a hardy band of members who were cheered by the positive response from the State League team. Members Betsy Jay and Maureen Murray agreed to serve as Co-Presidents. Formal minutes and meetings emerged in 2014, followed by a revised, simplified bylaws, adopted in 2016. With a membership of 67 and growing, and a leadership team—a President, Secretary, and collaborative Board—this revitalized League managed to organize in partnership with the LWV Oneonta two primary debates for the 19th Congressional District and a NYS Senate and Assembly debate. Recently, the LWV Cooperstown League also participated in the LWVNYS Death with Dignity study and consensus, hosted a community forum on the Constitutional Convention, met on aspects of the NYS Legislature and sponsored Students Inside Albany. In 2017, the LWVCA collaborated with the Cooperstown Graduate Program in Museum Studies, of SUNY Oneonta, to mount a robust schedule of women’s suffrage events from the fall of 2016 through November 2017. Programming, included a Votes for Women Reading Series, lectures, films, community programs, Women’s Right Vignettes at the Farmers Museum, a Suffrage music program, a Women’s Rights Exhibit at the Fenimore Art Museum, a production of Little Women by Cooperstown Central School, and a community program called “Theodora Talks” on the legacy of suffrage. The series of programs received Honorable Mention for the Inez Mulholland Women’s History Award at LWVNYS Convention that year.

Following the election in 2016, there was throughout the country a call to action and participation in government. Many people turned to the League to “Make Democracy Work.” In Cooperstown, members came forward to serve as leaders. Our League benefited and membership increased. Today, the LWVCA has a system of co-presidents and a full board. Our current member roster numbers 96 members in 65 households, including four youth members.

In 1974, LWVNYS President Joan S. McKinley, writing to LWVUS recommending the the LWV Cooperstown be recognized, noted “This is an unusual League and I suspect it will always remain so. It began as a state unit early in 1970. It was felt at that time both by the women from Cooperstown and the State Board that a community of 2,400 could not support full League activity. It is now possible to say without hesitation that they not only can, but do, in a lively fashion and with considerable imagination.”

Today our area is still small and, in fact, is losing population. Currently, these four towns and a village have a population of approximately 9,500—1,800 in the village—but throughout the years, the League remained respected in the community and collaborated with other local good

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government groups. The community looked to the League as *the* provider of candidates' forums and voter registration drives. The LWVCA has also formed stronger bonds with the other League in Otsego County, the LWV Oneonta. Together we lobbied for optical scan voting machines and are working to support the addition of a county administrator (which is now under discussion by the county board), and collaborated on candidates' events.

The local newspaper on the occasion of our 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary, noted,

“The Cooperstown League has had a particularly distinguished record of advocacy in the area of recycling, but it has made its mark in many other ways over the years. Members have studied and made recommendations in such areas as village planning, women and the law, health care financing public education, meeting basic human needs, reproductive rights, judicial reform, public authorities and county government, among others. Its candidates' nights have given voters direct contact with local regional office-seekers.

“The best part is members of the Cooperstown League show no signs of letting up.”

Cooperstown Crier November 11, 1994.

Notwithstanding difficult times, the League maintained its leadership role as an advocate for the environment and continued to meet with school officials to discuss the school budget, and other issues. And each year—even in the darkest years—members gathered for the Winter Doldrums party.

Times may have been tough, but the League was always too important to these “Four Towns and a Village” to simply fade away.