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THE
LWV
OF
SCHENECTADY

HISTORY
1925 ~ 1960

League of Women Voters
56 Washington Ave.
Scheneectady, N.Y. 12305

THE EARLY STRUGGLE

The League of Women Voters did not just happen, nor did any of the reforms and accomplishments which it has achieved come about easily. League women have given untold hours to the study of public affairs, great devotion to community service, and years of persistent public and legislative prodding.

With the ratification of the 19th amendment August 26, 1920, the League of Women Voters took up the work for better government where the National American Womens Suffrage Association left off. The NAWSA in the long fight for the vote for women, had become an efficient, politically wise, and powerful organization. Carrie Chapman Catt, President of the Suffrage Association, proposed the formation of a League of Women Voters and in February 1920 the last convention of the NAWSA, and the first convention of the League of Women Voters was held. Not all of the women who had worked for women's suffrage continued in the new organization, but some became its first officers and active members.

It did not take the League long to discover that 20 million women did not flock to the polls. In fact, many displayed a complete lack of appreciation of their right to vote that others had been so long in winning. It was 45 years after Susan B. Anthony drew up the wording of the 19th Amendment before it became law. So with the same dogged determination that women used to get the vote, they set out for three objectives: to educate themselves, to arouse all citizens to take part in government, and to work for needed legislation.



Women who join the Schenectady League today plunge into the urgent activities of the present with little knowledge of what has been done before in the Local League. It is the purpose of this booklet to tell the story of the LWV in Schenectady County from the time it was organized April 30, 1925, through 1960.

Mrs. Charles Richmond, wife of the President of Union College, called together about fifty women to meet at her home to learn about the League from Mrs. F. W. Slade, Chairman of the New York State League. What they heard must have appealed to these women for most of those present joined the League that day. Officers were elected and by-laws adopted. Dues were one dollar, of which half was sent to the State League to pay for a weekly bulletin for each member. The first members were women who were unaccustomed to dealing with governmental problems. But they knew that they possessed normal intelligence and a strong faith in democracy. They were wise enough to realize that they must know their subject well. And so began an organization trained from the start to first get the facts, and then present them to the public in such a way that support for the needed reforms would be forthcoming.

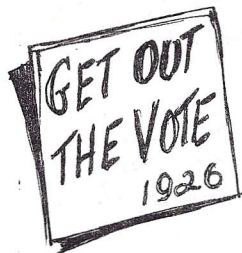
In the early years the League was a national organization in which State Leagues were the keystone of the structure. It was a federation of Leagues, not an association of members as it is today. A convention of representatives of the State Leagues chose the national officers and selected the program, which was national, state and local all in one. The program was divided into departments such as: Efficiency in Government, Education, Child

Welfare, Legal Status of Women, International Cooperation and Pre-Election Work. Each subject was tackled on national, state and local levels. (Now we have National Items, State Items and Local Items.)

Schenectady League began with a "Know Your Town" project, still recommended for new Leagues. Beginning their self-education one of the first meetings offered a debate on "The City-Manager Plan versus The Alderman-Mayor Plan for City Government." Then they had speakers to explain Americanization work, workmen's pensions, the city health organization, courts and their jurisdiction. They held their first "Candidates Meeting" with candidates for mayor as speakers, and an interpretation of a proposed amendment to the state constitution by Professor Godshall of Union College.

This first year was a busy and hectic one. There was no planned calendar for meetings. Instead they were worked out by the Executive Committee and then announced. Membership grew to ninety-one by the end of the year. The new League was faced with the problem of raising its quota of one-hundred dollars for the State League, so a garden party was given and tables of card players donated the necessary funds.

The program for the second year concentrated on Child Welfare, with the aim of establishing a Child Welfare Board in Schenectady County.



"Get Out The Vote" was an early slogan, and the League's pre-election activity soon became standard procedure. Providing citizens with accurate, non-partisan information on candidates and issues, and explaining voting procedures was a public service which attracted community attention and approval, and has continued to do so ever since.

In 1927 the Schenectady League was studying the Woman Juror Bill, the extension of the voter registration period, Child Labor Law Amendment and the different county agencies caring for children. A concentrated drive for new members was also made and forty-eight more women joined the LWV.

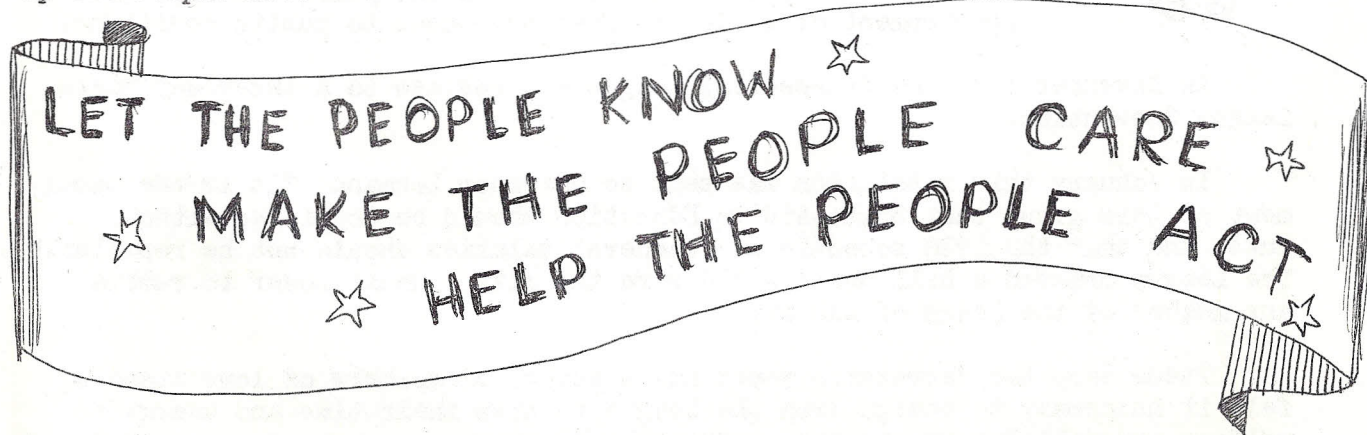
The high spot in 1928 came when Governor Alfred E. Smith was invited to speak and delighted the League members by accepting. The affair was a formal dinner meeting at the Hotel Van Curler, at which the Governor spoke on "The Government of New York State and What We Can Do To Make It More Efficient." This was quite a feather in the League's cap for 200 prominent citizens turned out, and the publicity was very favorable.

By this time League opinion was beginning to make itself felt in the community. The Capital Budget Commission working on long term improvements for the city of Schenectady asked for the League views. The League's stated opinion was that higher taxes would be burdensome. It recommended the highest possible efficiency in the administration of government, with the possible consolidation of certain departments. It also stated that it favored a future plan for a Council-Manager form of government.

Program committees for the year covered Citizenship, Efficiency in Government, International Cooperation to Prevent War, Legislation and Child Welfare. These subjects plus a study of local government under the leadership of Mr. Blase of the Bureau of Municipal Research, continued the League's self-education.

In 1929 the nominating committee found it impossible to persuade anyone to assume the office of League Chairman (President), so it was managed by a committee of ten. Few records were kept, but we know they continued to work for a Child Welfare Board. They discussed the value of county reorganization, beginning many years of study and action in this field. They met with other women's organizations that had similar interests. There were meetings to learn of protective legislation for women industrial workers, child welfare, and city and county health programs. The League also joined the Schenectady Council on Adult Education, a community group which sponsored forums and public meetings of educational value.

National and State League organizations both had their feet on the ground by 1931. The program up to this time had been largely one of self-education, mostly using speakers for the presentation of facts. This was good but not sufficient, since the education was limited to League members. Now a new idea was proposed: the formation of a Study Board, made up of fifteen to forty-five members who would study the subjects on the League program in groups, each with a chairman. The groups met twice a month, and from their research and investigations definite conclusions as to a course of action for the League as a whole were reached. These study groups provided program for the regular monthly League meetings and sometimes for public ones. The chairmen also reported at League Board meetings. The subjects and resource materials were provided by State and National League. This method developed specialists in each field, trained leaders for future groups, and established the League policy: Know your facts before taking a stand or going to the public. Fortified with facts discovered through their own research and discussions, the League could throw its energy into the struggle to influence public opinion and obtain effective legislation. Soon the LWV had another slogan which became its motto: "Let the People Know. Make the People Care. Help the People Act."



The problem of finances for the local League, which included meeting the State quota, was met by holding garden-card parties, selling magazine subscriptions, and sponsoring theater performances. Then for the first time the responsibility for fund raising was delegated to a Finance Chairman who also made up a budget.

The 1932-1933 League Program included three topics:

- I. Constructive Economy in Government
 - a. Efficiency in Administration
 - b. Education
 - c. Child Welfare
 - d. Living Costs

- II. Prevention and Relief of Unemployment
 - a. Legal Status of Women
 - b. Women in Industry

III. International Cooperation

This listing is included in our local history to show the enormous area of concern in which the League has always attempted to become well informed, and then to inform others.



The Schenectady group now felt confident enough to send this resolution to the County Board of Supervisors: "Be it resolved that the Schenectady League of Women Voters urges the Board of Supervisors of Schenectady County to appropriate sufficient funds for a Board of Child Welfare, to put the Child Welfare Law into operation in Schenectady County." League members were also urged to see their supervisors personally and ask that the resolution be brought before the Board.

They also sent a resolution to the City Mayor requesting that in considering the appointment of a Welfare Commissioner "he select a person who would be well qualified and whose personal integrity is beyond question." This was the first of many letters sent by the League, through the years, to urge the appointment of well-qualified personnel to public positions.

In November 1933 the Schenectady League was hostess to a three-day State League Convention.

In January this resolution was sent to Governor Lehmann: "It is the sentiment of this group that State-Aid to Education should be continued without cuts, and that the 1920 schedule of teachers' salaries should not be repealed." The League opposed a bill which would give the city council power to remove any member of the Board of Education.

These were the depression years and a number of members of long standing felt it necessary to resign from the League to give their time and energy to welfare and relief work, in the community. However, new members were added and

the League managed to raise its state quota to \$125. When the finance committee presented its budget, they suggested the dues be raised to two dollars, but this was voted down.

Three League members were asked to serve on the Public Works Committee on Housing headed by Mr. Olney Redmond. The members served on a sub-committee that was given credit for the appointment of the Municipal Housing Authority in Schenectady, the first in the state, and possibly in the nation.

The National League Board sent out "Calls to Action," even in those early days. One asked the Industrial Committee to make a survey of laundries as to wages, working hours, and conditions, to ascertain the benefit to workers of the new minimum wage law.

Also, as early as 1933 their study of county government convinced League members that various functions and services could be carried on more efficiently and economically on a countywide basis, under one executive head or manager.

THE MILITANT YEARS



Nineteen hundred and thirty-four was the beginning of the local bulletin, established to keep the members better informed on League activities.

In July the League publically supported the Charter League of the city with this declaration: "Resolved, that the Schenectady League of Women Voters is in sympathy with the objective of the Charter League to secure a simple, business-like form of government for the city." In the fall the candidates were invited to a meeting to hear the Council-Manager Plan discussed by Professor Stedman of the Syracuse School of Government and Citizenship.

The study of county government reorganization was intensified now because an amendment concerning it was to come before the voters in November. Connected with this study, and with the help of the Bureau of Municipal Research and the Temporary Emergency Relief Association (TERA), the League gathered information about the city purchasing department. This showed that food purchases were made through food vendors without competitive bidding. League members spoke to various groups to give the public this information.

A great deal of study and research in the field of education was done in 1935. A survey was made of rural schools to determine comparative per-pupil costs. Figures were tabulated by the League committee and then taken to the State Education Department in Albany for confirmation and were found to be correct. The Department had no such records on file and liked the idea so much that it had the per-pupil cost figures for every school district in the state. This information was then used to show the advantages of school district centralization.

