History of our 85 years

1889-1974
PREFACE

This book has been published with the hope that it will serve two purposes:

To acquaint or remind members and friends of the eighty-five year history of the Woman's Literary Union and its present functions and ultimate goals,

To add funds from its sales to the Former Presidents' Fund instituted by Mrs. Mitchell Cope, a former President. This fund provides recognition and appreciation to former Presidents for their dedicated service to the Woman's Literary Union.

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Mrs. Robert E. Lindquist, Immediate Past President, her Executive Board and Board of Directors for their approval to publish the booklet

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"When the completed weave of the fabric of life holds firm and is left there to be admired by mankind, with not a blemish seen in the strands, humanity may then arise and say, 'Well done, thou good and faithful servant, enter into the joys of thy achievement.'"

The completed fabric of the life of

EUNICE NICHOLS FRYE

is one to be admired and cherished by all with whom she came in contact.
"She builted better than she knew." This statement really needs the unisex pronoun sought by our present day youth. The impetus for the beginning of the Woman's Literary Union came from Mrs. Eunice Frye but her idea could not have reached fruition without the financial generosity of her husband, George Frye, and the availability of a resident lecturer in the person of the Rev. Asa Dalton, rector of St. Stephen's Episcopal Church.

Our founder, Eunice Nichols, was born in Vassalboro, Maine. After schooling at the local academy and Castine Normal School, she moved to New York where she taught and later worked in a mental institution where her brother was resident physician. She saw there the frustration and depression of women whose lives were devoid of intellectual stimulus or outside interest. The realization that mental illness might be caused in part from "emptiness" later led her to the interest in women's clubs as an extension of educational and cultural opportunities. In these endeavors she was warmly seconded by her husband.

The year was 1889. The women of Portland were seeking rights of equality as American citizens (they did not get the vote until 1920), better understanding of business matters and better opportunities in professions. It is amazing to discover that there were some fifty women's clubs in Portland important enough to have their activities listed in the local papers. The interests of these groups were varied, ranging from legislation on child labor, study of conditions in correctional and mental institutions, curricular changes in schools, on to topics offering further cultural and educational development for their members.

Mrs. Frye had the thought that out of these divergent interest groups there might be a core of clubs which, without losing their identity, could meet together two or three times a year to discuss matters of common concern. At the time the Rev. Dr. Dalton was a popular lecturer at various clubs and he was seeking a larger outlet for his lectures. In the spring of 1889, Mrs. Frye and Dr. Dalton called together a "Symposium" to discuss the possibility of federating some of the clubs. At subsequent meetings the matter was thoroughly discussed and in December of that year the Ladies Literary Union Club was formed. It was comprised of 10 clubs plus 21 women not members of the joining clubs who were admitted as associate members. Mrs. Susan Bragdon was the first president. The membership numbered 113.
Thus was born the first federation of Women's Clubs in the United States, and from it grew the Maine State Federation of Woman's Clubs. The goals of the Woman's Literary Union were to "stimulate the intellectual and cultural life of its members and to promote a spirit of cooperation in the community". These aims continue to be basic to the organization's functions. The WLU has never sought to be purely a "literary" group, but rather to consider subjects pertinent to the times, whether they be homemaking (classes in sewing, gardening), governmental (lectures on current events, national and international topics), literary (both classes and lectures) as well as to offer social activities to its members.

The following April (1890) at the first annual meeting, the name of the group was officially changed to the Women's Literary Union. The officers of the WLU with a delegate from each club formed the standing committee. Anyone joining one of the federated clubs automatically became a member of the WLU. Since each member club had its own meetings, the WLU usually held three joint meetings a year.

One of the first projects of the Union, one which was well received by the townspeople, was of benefit to the public schools. WLU members noted the lack of art objects, pictures and sculpture in the schools. By the tenth anniversary of its founding, the Union could announce that its fund-raising efforts had provided statuary and/or pictures for every school in the city. Since the women were interested in homemaking, they also equipped the first Portland classroom for the teaching of Home Economics and paid the first year's salary for a teacher of Home Economics.

In 1908, the WLU, after extensive consideration, voted to amalgamate the individual clubs making up the Union into departments, thus consolidating even further the federation. Five departments were set up: Literature and Art, Sociology, Education, Forestry, Crafts and Industries. Each department was to have charge of one afternoon program annually. At this time there were 61 clubs and 26 associate members in the Union with a total membership of about 500.

In its early days the WLU had met in any hall large enough to accommodate the program. Miss Ella Bangs, who wrote the story of the WLU in 1920, stated, "We might well have been called the Peregrination Club, for, like the children of Israel, we wandered many years before entering the Promised Land, or, in other words, a club house of our own."

The permanent home became a possibility in January 1916 when Mr. George C. Frye, husband of the founder of the WLU and a highly respected Portland businessman, offered to the Union a house and a lot of about 10,000 square feet on Spring Street to become the Union
headquarters. In addition, he announced a matching gift of $10,000 in cash for the auditorium to be built on the land if the Union itself would provide $15,000 for the construction. The WLU accepted the land and buildings gratefully. Its treasury already had a building fund of some $8,000, and immediate action was taken to raise the amount to $15,000. Generous local support was forthcoming, and Union members undertook some very interesting and successful fund raising projects, including a Groote Winkel or Dutch Village Fair and a Shakespeare Festival. In the meantime, the Union went ahead with the construction, taking out a mortgage and signing a one year note for $5,000 which was repaid promptly. It was unanimously agreed that the auditorium would be called Frye Hall in gratitude to Mr. Frye and in honor of his wife. The hall, containing an auditorium with a seating capacity of 900 and a banquet hall seating 300, was finished in February 1917. The Club House, of red brick colonial architecture, built in the 1820's, contained many fine period furnishings. The house itself had been restored in harmony with the period of its construction as much as possible.

The WLU was fortunate indeed in having a club house but it also took real initiative and hard work to keep the large establishment going. The Presidents and their Executive Boards needed to know a great deal about building maintenance, finances, etc. One source of income was from the rental of the auditorium and banquet hall. For other means, various projects were organized, such as bridge parties, rummage sales, food sales, auctions, etc. Activities, classes, meetings, exhibits and lectures were scheduled so that the buildings were in constant use. Frye Hall was in demand also by outside groups.

A fund had been established to provide for an annual community lecture. This made available to the city some outstanding lecturers. The series met with considerable success. Over the years the WLU won recognition for its support of CARE, and was cited by the General Federation of Women's Clubs and the Sears and Roebuck Foundation for its community improvement programs.

The memory of our founder, Mrs. Eunice Frye, has remained a living force throughout the years, and frequently at a meeting in December, the anniversary month of the birth of the WLU, she has been specially honored. At the first of these occasions, held in 1932, five of the seven living charter members gave personal reminiscences of the founder. This was the beginning of a happy tradition which has continued through the years. In December 1974 a gala Founder's Day was highlighted by an outstanding stage production giving, in selected scenes, the history of the 85 years of the Woman's Literary Union. Members played their former roles or those of their predecessors, and music appropriate to the periods involved was played and sung.
OUR FORMER CLUB HOUSE AND FRYE HALL
FORMER CLUB HOUSE OFFICE

WOMEN'S CLUB HOUSE, FRONT HALL
SCENES FROM "OUR 85TH ANNIVERSARY PLAY" –
WRITTEN and DIRECTED by DAGMAR PETERSEN.
OUR PRESENT, CLUB HOUSE
As mentioned previously, the WLU was a precursor of the Maine State Federation of Women's Clubs. Mrs. Frye was also the founder of the state organization, and thus the ties to the State Federation have been close over the years. Many members of the WLU have served in the state offices. The Maine Federation became the second state federation to join the General Federation. WLU members also served frequently as delegates for the General Federation meetings.

The Golden Anniversary of the WLU was celebrated in 1939. At that time the State Federation presented it with a bronze plaque in memory of Mrs. Frye. A very elaborate celebration was not deemed proper at the time as members were becoming involved in war and relief work.

When national or international events have required extra work or contributions on the part of our members, they have always responded generously. Thus, the two world wars called for special programs and activities; knitting, first aid, home nursing classes and volunteer work replaced the more traditional activities of the members.

In the early days, the WLU membership was about 500. The number of members doubled through the years, waning somewhat in the war years, but sustaining a solid core of interested women. Credit for its continuing success lies in the goals and purposes, which were adapted to the times and interests of the members. Some activities have been maintained almost constantly. In the effort to prepare women for club work, a course in Parliamentary Law was one of the first offerings. Until recently, it has been among the offerings nearly every year, and has helped generations of women to handle meetings correctly and efficiently. Art and sewing continue as favorite courses, and literature, varying in area or emphasis, has maintained a prime place on the schedule.

Foreign languages, dramatics, self expression, formerly very popular as classes have disappeared, as topics such as Antiques, Crewel Embroidery, Duplicate Bridge and Bowling took their place, with a recent addition of a Theatre and Travel Club. This latter group attends a summer theatre program and two or three plays in Boston during the fall and winter season. Travel opportunities for the members have included visits to the Pennsylvania Dutch area and to Cape Cod and the Shelburne Museum in Vermont.

Whatever interests not covered by the special courses or classes are undoubtedly met by the rich offerings of the Friday programs. As a pattern of activity, the first Friday of each month a Social Hour is held, followed by an Open House, dessert and bridge. The second Friday is dedicated to literary purposes, one lecture in the late morning, followed by sandwiches and coffee, and a second program at one o'clock. The third Friday a membership luncheon is held at which
there is a speaker and a musical program. Finally, on the fourth Fri­day, the morning program is a Forum on topics of current local or national interest and importance, and the afternoon program is re­lated to international affairs. In the past year several programs were on the theatre, old and new, on community problems such as Con­sumerism, Law Enforcement, Environment, on book collecting, on be­ing an author, on Economics, Southeast Asia, Rhodesia, Labrador. The attendance at these meetings is excellent so it is obvious that the selections are attractive to the members.

To carry on the work of the WLU, the President, Executive Com­mittee and Directors have as support a slate of standing committees covering all aspects of the activities from Housekeeping, Hospitality, to Investment, Music, Publicity and Scholarship to mention only a few. This distribution of responsibility makes it possible for many members to contribute their abilities to the ongoing work, and, in such a large organization, facilitates greatly its smooth operation.

One unusual facet of the WLU is the Youth Council. Two or three representatives from the junior class of high schools in the Portland area, including Waynflete, are chosen by the schools to receive memberships in the WLU. These students (by recent change in the by-laws can be male or female) are selected for their scholar­ship or leadership potential. The Youth Council meets with the pa­rent group Youth Council Committee during the year and the student members are welcome to attend regular programs. In the spring they are guests at a membership luncheon at which time they prepare and present a program. It is considered an honor to be chosen as a member of the Junior Council. The regular members enjoy the opportunity to introduce the Union to the young people, to sample their thinking, and to demonstrate at first hand the type of cooperative endeavor the WLU affords.

A continuing interest of the Union has been education, not only for its members, but for young people, by encouraging them through awards to seek further education. Thus the WLU has offered an an­nual scholarship for a student from one of the Greater Portland high schools who is planning to teach. Another, in memory of Mrs. Charles Fobes Flagg, is given by her daughter. Both these awards rotate among the high schools.

Events of the years become telescoped, especially as the WLU flourished and continued to attract members, and to offer educational and social opportunities to members and the community. The diffi­culties are less evident but as with any on-going organization, they existed. In the early years officers were uneasy about making reports or conducting meetings. Experience and acceptance produced more relaxed attitudes, and by the 65th anniversary WLU officers and mem­bers presented a program on both radio and television on several local stations to celebrate the occasion and honor the founder.
By this time it was becoming evident that the upkeep of the Club House and Frye Hall were becoming worrisome. To provide modern conveniences (such as the installation of a public address system), additions were necessary. Moreover, needed also were basic repairs, roof replacement, painting, etc. It therefore became necessary to raise the dues. It was the beginning of financial stresses. The membership at this period dropped about 100 (to approximately 900). From this time (1958) the number of members dwindled a little each year. However, those remaining were deeply committed and in the next few years the fund raising efforts made possible the continuance of the annual scholarship, the re-roofing of Frye Hall, and the initiation of new projects and interests such as the Friday Forum which continues today. The economic plight required great effort, even to the point that members were cleaning the Club House themselves to save money. The continued rental of Frye Hall and the banquet hall and other facilities helped in meeting the bills. It was at this point (December 1964) that the WLU, membership now down to about 400, celebrated with optimism its 75th anniversary.

Optimism was indeed needed for the membership continued to shrink, the Union was stretching its finances with growing expenses, and the dues, raised several times in the decade, could not reasonably be increased. The core of loyal members continued to make gigantic efforts by introducing new money raising efforts, attempts to increase the membership, new programs to attract members, etc. So successful was the membership effort that the Union won the state award for the highest membership gain of any club in Maine that year.

But there were other serious worries. The City of Portland, involved in urban renewal, as were major American cities, wished to acquire the WLU property. The realization that the property could not be held against renewal demands caused the Union to set up a Task Force to study the situation. It came up with a counter proposal for the property, with a financial offer of thirty thousand dollars more than the city had proposed. Now the President and Executive Committee were indeed faced with a tremendous decision. The blunt facts were hard to face. Whether or not the organization desired to move, the property could be lost by eminent domain at any time so the sale was inevitable. Therefore, the next decision was “Where do we go from here?” The Task Force investigated many pieces of property but, with the rising costs and in spite of the sale price of the Club House and Frye Hall, nothing in reasonable range, which would provide money for upkeep as well as for purchase, was available. The sad reality was that the WLU could no longer afford the wonderful, spacious facilities it had enjoyed for 82 years. On February 25, 1971 the newspapers announced the purchase of the property by the Holiday Inn to be taken over by May 1st.
The President and Executive Committee announced in mid-April that after much deliberation it had arranged for a temporary home. It was Proctor House on the Westbrook College Campus, formerly the residence of the College President. While the house was small and provided no large meeting room for the Friday meetings (attended by approximately 100 people) it was pleasant and in good condition. It was arranged that the large meetings could be held in Alexander Hall, the student activity building adjacent to Proctor House, and that classroom space could be arranged at the College for any class or activity too large for the Proctor House meeting rooms.

Immediately, moving arrangements were made. Furnishings and equipment not needed in the new club house were either put in storage or auctioned off to members and friends, and the move was made on April 30. Dr. James Dickinson, the President of Westbrook College, was most cordial in welcoming the WLU to the campus. On May 13, 1971 the local papers carried a picture of the debris where the Club House and Frye Hall formerly stood, a sad sight to the many who had enjoyed the ambiance and the traditions of the original gracious headquarters.

The move to Westbrook was made with a membership of about 400 and a good financial situation. There were many advantages to the move, in spite of the loss of the spacious Club House and Frye Hall. As has been indicated, the cost of maintenance of aging buildings had already placed the organization in financial straits; the membership had decreased substantially; the dues had reached a maximum; the loyal core of members would no longer have to carry the burden of housekeeping chores and upkeep. The very real regret and nostalgia of many members are completely understandable but the solution certainly makes possible a continuance of some of the "gracious living" which existed heretofore. By the annual meeting in April of 1974, the WLU seemed well established in its new environment. The year had been a busy one, with well attended programs, and interest groups in Antiques, Art, Bowling, Crewel Embroidery, Duplicate Bridge, Garden, Sewing and Theatre as well as two literary courses, one in Humanities, the other on Maine Authors.

During the summer of 1974 a devoted group of members assisted in refurbishing the interior of Proctor House by choosing new paper, curtains and colors. They brought from storage some of the WLU treasures, including the portrait of Mrs. Frye which now graces the living room. These changes made the headquarters seem more like home to members who recall with fondness the former club house.

The relations with Westbrook College are most cooperative. In early 1974 President Dickinson accepted an endowed scholarship which the Woman's Literary Union offered in recognition of the generosity of the College in making its facilities available to the organization.
During the worries over the loss of the Club House and Frye Hall the WLU had yet another major decision to make. As has been mentioned, Mrs. Frye, our founder, was also the organizer of the Maine Federation of Women’s Clubs (1890). The WLU was always very active in the Maine Federation and many members held offices in the state organization and participated actively in the General Federation. With the passage of years, the increased costs, and the financial pressures on the WLU brought into focus the need for retrenchment of expenses. Thus, after much deliberation and discussion it was decided to withdraw from the Maine Federation. This action was taken in December 1972 with reluctance. It seemed prudent to use the money which would have gone into the announced increase of Maine Federation dues for local needs and service to members of the Woman’s Literary Union.

And so we arrive at our 85th birthday, with the organization once again growing in membership, morale high, the facilities pleasant and comfortable. While the “phoenix” is not identical with the one which disappeared with Frye Hall, it is a vigorous organization, geared to new life and new endeavors, and certainly not feeling the weight of its 85 years.

One can cheerfully predict that in 1989 the centennial of the Woman’s Literary Union will be joyfully celebrated, and that the officers of that day will feel, as we do, that “the past is but prologue”.

April 1975
1. Materials for this report were obtained from Presidents' annual reports, scrap books, Year Books, personal chats with former Presidents and other long-time members of the Woman's Literary Union.

2. Documents on file which were used in this history include:

History of the Woman's Literary Union Ella M. Bangs 1920

Radio Program on the 65th Anniversary of the Woman's Literary Union Frances Wight 1954

History of the WLU - 1929-1959 Mrs. Percival Bachelder 1958

A Brief Resume of the Woman's Literary Union from 1889-1973 for the Youth Council Mrs. Mitchell Cope 1973

3. A special note of appreciation is offered to those former Presidents who so kindly met together to share with me their memories of the WLU activities, and to those who loaned me materials from their files.

The Past Presidents who attended the informational meeting were:

Mrs. Percival A. Bachelder President 1931-1933

Mrs. Carroll S. Chaplin President 1948-1950

Mrs. Walter M. Bachelder (away but gave information by letter) President 1952-1954

Mrs. Donald Wight President 1954-1956

Mrs. Norman E. Hubbard President 1956-1958

Mrs. Charles F. Drescher President 1962-1963

Mrs. John G. Lyons President 1963-1965

Mrs. Roy E. Heywood President 1965-1967

Mrs. Philip V. Corey President 1969-1971

Mrs. Robert L. Getchell President 1971-1973