

History of the League of Women Voters of Rensselaer County

By Christina Shaver Kelly – adapted from a longer piece 1/2020

“Let the people know, make the people care, and help the people act.”

“The League is an action organization. Study without action is futile. Action without study is fatal. The League is a non-partisan, political action organization.”

“Democracy is not a spectator sport.”

The LWVRC took two tries to get launched. In December 1923, there was a preliminary meeting about a Rensselaer County League in Troy at the home of Mrs William Frear, attended by a couple of other socially prominent women and a couple of teachers from Emma Willard School. A Mrs Carl Stevens led a Troy League for a couple of years, but the group disbanded. The LWVRC began in earnest in October 1939. Beulah Bailey Thull was the first President of the organization, which adopted the motto: “Let the people know, make the people care, and help the people act.” Thull, a former suffragist, was a speech writer for FDR, a librarian, a NYS tax specialist, and union organizer as well as a

race car driver by the new analyze the the city what a

Right programs until today. As issue, then

following have early years: providing and the issues on who government., County changes to as possible, social justice issues, local schools, and environmental issues.



BRIGHT—Mrs. Beulah Bailey Thull, left, of the Troy League of Women Voters Saturday night

in her later years. The first task adopted group of about 40 women was to budget of the City of Troy and suggest to good budget should look like.

from the start, the League initiated which though modified, have continued you know, the League first chooses an studies it extensively, then makes a recommendation for action. The been ongoing program items from the registering all eligible voters and impartial information on the candidates for each election, as well as information represents them at every level of studying Troy city and Rensselaer government and recommending make them as open and representative

The second President , Catherine Benson, initiated two ongoing voter programs: voter registration and the “Know your town” series of pamphlets, a component of voter education. The late 1940’s saw the first candidate forums, and in 1950, the LWVRC published its first edition of “Know Your

County," along with the first election guides, which provided information about candidates and amendments on the ballots. At the same time, the league hosted a monthly radio program on WTRY.

A voting goal beginning in 1954 was Permanent Personal Voter Registration, only achieved in 1967. From 1965 to 1970, the LWVRC ran a "Voters Mailbag" column in the Troy Record, tackling common voter questions.

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League Promotes Voter Participation

By JOSEPH A. PARKER

This is a significant year for women voters. Nationally it is the 50th anniversary of woman suffrage and of the founding of the League of Women Voters.

It is also the 30th anniversary of the League of Women Voters of Rensselaer County.

During those years members of the county league have contributed thousands of hours of their time to study public issues, to help inform the public what the issues are and who the candidates are at election time and to help improve government agencies.

What is the league's present emphasis:

"To increase voter service and to get the young voters to establish channels in the democratic process," according to Mrs. Robert A. Stierer, president of the league.

She added that the league believes in the democratic system strongly, the public's wider interest in their government on all levels and the voter's expression of opinion on important issues.

Take Stands

In recent years, the league has also become interested in and taken stands on day care for children, water resources and poverty.

School Board and to establish regular public meetings. Mrs. Edwin Allen was chairman of the committee.

Another Project

The league also worked with the women's joint committee on probation services and helped establish the County Probation Department. Miss Elizabeth Scherer was chairman of the committee.

Mrs. Stierer was the chairman of the league's community-wide Day Care Conference in which 40 agencies participated last January. It resulted in the establishment of the county day care council.

The league also has prepared such publications as "Know Your City," "Know Your County," "Know Your Schools," "Water Resources Report of Upper Hudson Basin in Rensselaer County Area," and "Up the Ladder." The last pamphlet is a study of the anti-poverty programs in the county.

During the 50th anniversary



NEW AND TRANSFER members of the League of Women Voters of Rensselaer County are greeted by Mrs. Robert A. Stierer, president, at extreme left. Others in the photo at the membership tea at the Rensselaer County Arts Center, from left, are Mrs. J. Michael Abbott, Mrs. Joseph Rondeau, Mrs. Gordon Eadie, Mrs. Bernd Foerster and Miss Kathleen Belanger.

voting age. Members also can transfer their membership from one community to another.

Mrs. Frank McKay of East Greenbush is voters service chairman.

Its officers and directors, however, on local, state and national levels refrain from partisan

Mrs Mary Stierer was President of the League as it celebrated its 30th anniversary in 1969. She and her husband Bob were instrumental in the group for the rest of their lives. After her death in 2008, the LWVRC established the Mary C. Stierer Making Democracy Work Award. Mary and Bob also gave a five-year grant with a yearly award to a Troy High School senior interested in pursuing a career in government. It was administered happily by Diane Bell. "Making Democracy Work" became a national LWV program in 1973. Thanks to Mary Stierer the LWVRC had already adopted the program. Nationally allowing men to become members of the LWVRC was contentious, but Mary noted "the work matters, not the membership," and men became members here with no problem. A major program item in the 1990's was still "Making Democracy Work," with Mary still working to increase voter registration.

While Mildred Resnick was President from 1977-79, she moderated a debate between local Congressional candidates, while the League ran a speakers bureau, with members available to speak on various election issues. Mary Abbott, still a member, served as Vice-President during this time, and

indeed for a number of years. At this time two other ongoing projects of the LWVRC began: registration of local high school seniors to vote and use of an observer corps to attend meetings and moderate elections. Irene began enrolling students at Brittonkill in 1980, with the slogan: Democracy is not a spectator sport. In the late '70's, the league also sponsored a monthly luncheon lecture series on topics such as property tax assessment, women and the law, and the family court system.

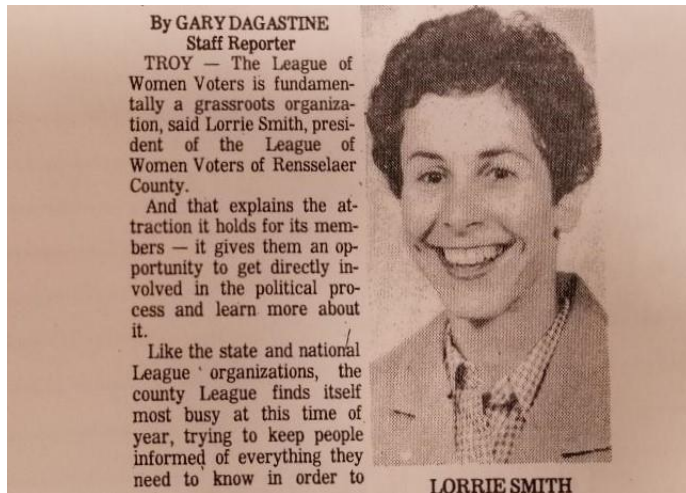
The League has also studied our county government and that of the city of Troy and made recommendations over the years. Marie Spafford, President in 1942, initiated another continuing program item of the league- studying the county government and if and how it should change. In 1957 under President Margaret Spencer, the League supported a change to the city manager form of government in Troy. I won't even try to outline the ins and outs, twists and turns of this topic through the decades, but the bottom line for the League has always been better representation, more opportunity for citizen participation, and more transparency in government. In 1971 the LWVRC advocated for a change to the county manager form of government. The group was criticized for taking a position on the matter.



President Ann Hansen (3rd from left above) responded, "The League is an action organization. Study without action is futile. Action without study is fatal. The League is a non-partisan, political action organization." At this time the LWVRC had units in Greenbush, Brunswick, and Troy, with babysitting available during meetings in Troy and Brunswick.

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Lorrie Smith was President from 1979-1983. Locally the focus was still on more effective county and city governments. committee led by Irene Wynnyczuk and Mary Stierer pushed for increasing the number of districts in the county to make representation more equitable. This was an issue for many years, and has not been achieved. Lorrie has been member ever since, and received the Mary Stierer Award from Irene in May 2019: below.



In the early 1990's under the leadership of Irene Wynnyczuk, the League began to produce "They Represent You..a who's who of elected officials" in the county- still produced and widely available. Irene became President of the League in 1995. From then until 2010, the LWVRC was hired by the Troy Housing Authority to monitor its elections for tenant commissioners, a demanding task as there were about 11 voting sites. Other monitoring jobs were at the Troy and East Greenbush Library Boards- still continuing. -Irene worked with WMHT on candidate forums, filling various roles, from moderator to timer, to question collector.

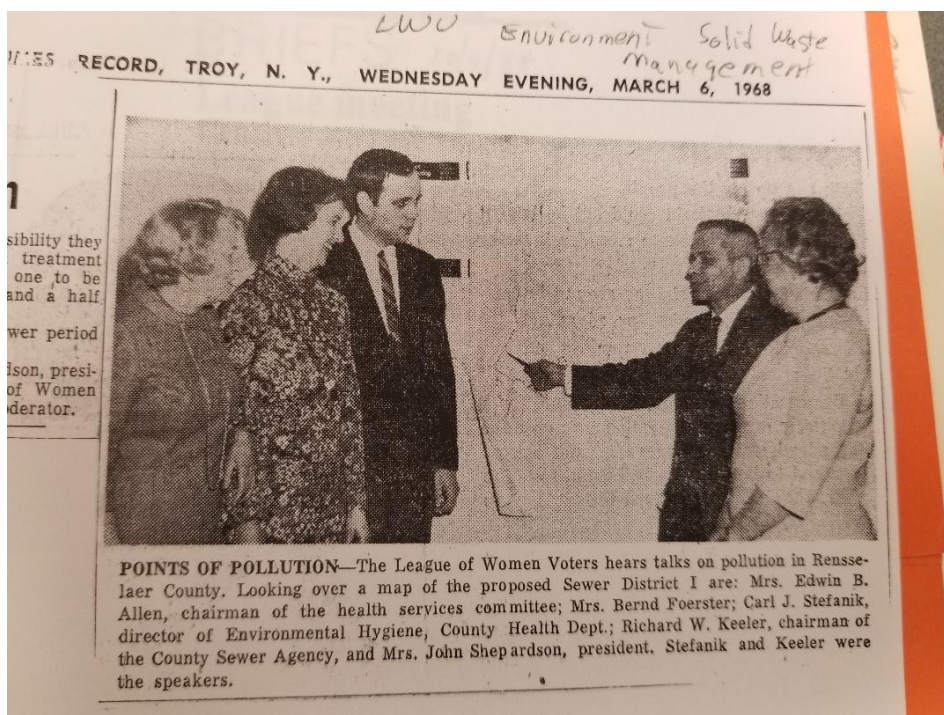
On the social justice front, seeing a need for affordable housing, in 1942, some league members joined the Troy Council of Social Agencies to help organize a Troy Housing Authority. This initiated another continuing focus of our group: advocacy for equal opportunity in all sorts of social ways, and doing it in cooperation with other local groups. This continued in 1950, with a partnership with the Junior League, the Parent Teacher Council, and the YWCA. In the 1960's, the League participated in the

national Civil Rights movement on a local level during the terms of Ruth Binder and Enell Foster. Members surveyed local firms on their willingness to hire blacks, worked to prepare better voter materials for inner-city voters, held registration drives at housing projects, and studied sub-standard rural and urban housing. Members also studied day care options. In the 1970's, the program expanded to include equal access to health care, revenue sharing, and welfare reform. In 1990 the LWVRC registered its support for Unity House and affordable housing for all.

Still another early study was local schools. One of the first goals was to learn about the Troy City School District and elect one or more women to the board. By the late 1940's the LWVRC under Presidents Carolyn Hull Curry and Mae Scheel VanVelsor, advocated for improvement of the Troy School system. In the 1950's the League advocated for more funding for the Troy schools. Of course this began with a complete physical examination of the schools, under the leadership of Mrs Barbara Jones. Another aspect of the school study was to equalize educational opportunities for all students, a goal adopted by Dr. Edith Ware, President in the 1950's, but also championed by Irene Wynnyczk in the 1980's. The goal would be fair taxation and equal quality education throughout the state, while retaining local control. This is still not achieved by a long shot.

The League began advocating for a school lunch program for the Troy City Schools in 1971. The federal program was voluntary, though 95% of schools in NY participated. Troy resisted change as it would mean an end to bussing students home for lunch, a big change in teacher schedules, and the cost of improvement of cafeteria facilities in the schools. The league found that though really needed, it was difficult for parents to admit that it would help them too. The change was finally made, but it took several years of study and advocacy. Perhaps as a result of the success of its work with Troy, the Lansingburgh Schools asked the LWVRC to study its system just a couple of years later.

Environmental activism has been another ongoing program item of the LWVRC. This began in



1956 with a study of water resources as they relate to government, with a focus on supply and pollution, led former President Marie Spafford. In 1966 the League sponsored a film on the topic, and in 1968 held sessions on a proposed sewer district for Troy.

In 1990 Helen Bayly attended an international conference on Acid Rain and chaired a county drinking water advisory committee. The League has added other environmental issues over the years, from advocacy for the Bottle bill, then under Diane Bell, in 2009, the Bigger Better bottle Bill and further study and advocacy of proper solid waste management. Diane produced "Getting Rid of Stuff", a guide to recycling everything. Addressing global warming was added as an issue in 2007.

A final focus of the LWVRC has been using the media to get its message across. There have been many, many publications of voter information, which now appear online. From the early radio show on WTRY, to the voter mailbag in the paper, to use of a "mobile office" to take voter registration materials around the county, to hiring temporary office space in the Frear Building during election season, members have tried many ways to reach potential voters. In the 1990's Helen Bayly appeared on local access TV and Irene worked with WMHT later in that decade. Thanks mostly to Don and Diane Bell, the League had an early website, and now its records are stored online as well. In the last few years, the LWVRC has been a frequent presence at the Troy Waterfront Farmers Market on Saturdays- John Sniezek and Shirley Buel, below, another way to reach voters.



As I have done this research and writing, one final obvious conclusion is that for many women, participation in the League has been a life-long commitment. I have tried to find commonalities among the women who became President of the group, but have not really found any. There were a few husbands of RPI professors, a couple of newspaper women, employees at non-profit social institutions, lawyers, nurses, educators. A couple of women became President having recently become mothers, others after retirement from demanding jobs. All share an abiding interest in the goals of the organization.

In researching the history of this organization I began by going to the Grenander Archive at SUNY Albany, which houses the organizations' records. They were first stored at Troy Public Library, but after Mary Stierer's death, they were re-organized and moved. The Hart Cluett Museum has a couple more boxes of records. I used the website Fultonhistory.com houses digital issues of the Troy newspaper from 1920-1973. Most years there were about 50 articles about the activities of this organization in the Troy paper. I also contacted all of the women who have been President of the group who are still active and asked them about their terms of office.

