

The Evolution of women in Civic Life

In the 1950s and early 1960s one of the most dominant forms of civic associations was women's clubs. The most common activities of the 600 women's clubs and auxiliaries were supporting specific social institutions or causes and raising money for scholarships. For example, Delta Zeta sorority put on a fashion tea to raise money for hearing aids for the deaf. The American Business Women's Association provided scholarships for nurses in training. The Oregon State Emblem Club presented a station wagon to the Crippled Children and Adult Association. The Daughters of the Nile made clothes for the Shriner's Hospital. The American Association of University Women sponsored a talk about bridging the high school and college education curricula. The Seventh Day Adventists and the Banfield Business and Professional Women's Club both hosted presentations about civil defense preparedness. Women's groups set up self-improvement workshops such as the "Building Bridges for Friendships" put on by the Federation of Business and Professional Women. The YWCA organized workshops for high school young ladies such as Boy-girl relationships, selling ideas, and charm, while the Girl Scouts touted one on "How to Live a Long Life."

A few women's organizations took part in the political side of civic life. In 1960 the Women of B'nai B'rith sponsored anti-bigotry forums. The Portland Women's Research Club presented a forum on Racial Problems in the North. The American Association of University Women (AAUW) laid out an agenda for the year that included legislation for the United Nations, federal aid for schools, an end to wage discrimination

because of sex, and liberalizing international trade agreements. The AAUW also pushed the state to enact stronger billboard restrictions on highways. The Portland Women's Club focused on patient welfare. The Oregon Nurses Association lobbied the State of Oregon for better health programs in schools.

It is also evident from membership rosters of citizen advisory committees, commissions, and trade and professional licensing boards during this period that women were poorly represented. Of the 711 members of all the civic bodies, 591 were men (71 percent). Women made up only 8 percent of the boards, 10 percent of the citizen advisory committees, and 26 percent of the commissions. While this last figure may seem high for the times, it should be noted that women served on commissions that were considered women's domain: arts and culture and human services. Of the 90 women on commissions during this period, 58 served on the Arts Commission, Metropolitan Youth Commission, Zoo Commission, Pittock Mansion Commission, and Japanese Garden Commission. On the more powerful City Planning Commission, Portland Development Commission, and Housing Commission there were 10 women and 43 men.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s many new women's groups emerged, although traditional women's organizations held their own in terms of number and membership. For example, the League of Women Voters' membership declined only slightly from 700 in 1962 to 600 in 1972. The American Association of University Women's membership increased slightly between 1962 and 1972, from 653 to 700. Likewise the National Council of Jewish Women went up from 600 members in 1962 to 725 in 1972. Of course, the population in Portland had also increased, which helps account for their numbers.

But, the figures demonstrate that while some women marched into the halls of power, most continued to carry out their traditional roles through traditional civic organizations. A special insert on women's clubs in the Oregon Journal, (Solute to Women, 1969) summarized the contribution of women as "typified by club women in a number of ways. Usually they raise funds from bake sales, rummage sales or book sales with proceeds earmarked for hospitals, schools, nursing homes, or any of a thousand other places where there's a need." The editors also noted that, "along with self improvement the professionally oriented women is concerned about her community. Climbing the business ladder is vertical, but alert and aware women are constantly challenged to reach out horizontally to help others."

The domains of traditional women's organizations and emergent feminist organizations were separate for the most part, but not always. In August 1972 a gathering of women's organizations called the Feminist Fare was representative of the cross-over between traditional women's groups and new ones. The Fare, which created tables for information distribution, entertainment, and workshops and plays, included traditional and new women's organizations, including the Abortion Information and Referral Service, the International League for Peace and Freedom, Council of Jewish Women, Oregon Council for Women's Equality, the National Council of Negro Women, the League of Women Voters, and YWCA.

In this period, indeed, women woke up, often one by one, to the inequalities of their status in society and to the power of women working together. They gathered together in collectives, consciousness raising groups, and kitchens. Sally Landauer recalled how in 1967 she and Vera Katz, (two-term mayor of Portland in the 1990s) had

their “a-ha!” moment while on their knees, waxing Vera’s kitchen floor, and wondering, “why are we doing this (Bonner, 1994)?” Betty Murten, a founder of Sensible Transportation Options for People (STOP), among other social causes, also remembered one of those moments:

It was a time of beginning to think globally and act locally. A lot was cooking in those kitchens. What's interesting to me sociologically now is that we were probably the last generation of married women who had the luxury of being supported by our husbands, and we were all educated, so here was this incredible resource that the country doesn't have any longer. Families need two incomes, and so we don't have this incredible reservoir of volunteer energy and intelligence today (Bonner, 2001a).

Women banded together in political organizations and through political causes that sometimes took them across class boundaries. Women’s bookstores, health clinics, and hangouts such as the Mountain Moving Café, became important places for women to meet as women. Bonnie Tinker, a founder of the Bradley Angle House, one of the first shelters for battered women in the country, recalled how her own awakening to political consciousness through the peace and non violence movement, was expanded by contact with women who had been abused in their marriages or families, so that she was made aware “that oppression was not just a theoretical construct, but that there were real material consequences to living without money or education and suffering from violence (De Mar, 2003, p. 236).” Since the feminist awakening happened for some on many levels at once, from the macro or global to the micro or personalist political, women like Tinker found themselves raising their own consciousness, while trying to push others and

society in a feminist direction--an exciting but difficult surge of activities to sustain.

There were also many more new women-oriented or women-only organizations with a political orientation than there were in traditional civic Portland. In the early 1970s Portland had a chapter of the National Organization for Women, as well as the Portland Area Women's Political Caucus, a statewide political action group that worked to promote women's issues and feminist candidates. Other women's political organizations included: the Progressive Women's Association, the Council for Women's Equality, and the Women's Legislative Council. At least one traditional civic organization, the YWCA, turned with the tide of the women's movement by opening the Women's Resource Center that provided direct services for women. The state of Oregon created the Governor's Committee on the Status of Women and a separate advisory committee on the problems of inequalities in employment, the State Advisory Council on Sex Discrimination.

Women were also storming the bastions of male power. The Portland City Club was beseeched by members of the Women's Political Caucus and others to change its male-only membership rule. While many City Club members resisted, some such as prominent lawyer Sidney Lezak, supported the women, and resigned in protest. Sally Landauer (Bonner, 1994), one of the organizers who had confronted the City Club's men recalled years later the action as both earnestly important and fun:

So the Wednesday Winos became POW (Politically Oriented Women) or, as some of the men in the City Club called it, Penis Oriented Women. We picketed the City Club for at least two years. Every Friday we marched around the front of the Benson Hotel (the hotel did not appreciate it!). That was where the City Club

met even then. We carried our signs. We marched.

Finally in 1974, and after several rejections, the City Club voted to allow women full membership status. In 1982, Pauline Anderson was elected as the Club's first woman president. With an ironic sense of enfranchisement, also in 1974, the League of Women Voters passed a motion to allow men to join.

It took years for other exclusively male clubs to follow the City Club's lead. Some groups were forced to change. In 1987 the National Rotary Club was forced by the U.S. Supreme court to admit women. In 1989, the Royal Rosarians, Portland's "goodwill ambassadors," associated with the 100-year-old Rose Festival accepted women after the Portland City Council passed a resolution that forced them to change. The University Club and the Arlington Club, the traditional meeting place of the civic elite, granted women full membership rights in 1990.

Women-only health services, such as the Women's Health Clinic, unheard of in Portland in the early 1960s, were founded during this period, and abortion was heating up as an issue, with both sides founding political action organizations. In 1972, the anti-abortion groups Oregon Right to Life, and Oregon Birthright, were formed. The Women's Health Clinic and the Abortion Information and Referral Service provided referrals for women wanting abortions. As more women entered the workforce, childcare also became a critical issue. While the number of childcare providers only increased from 22 in 1960 to 30 in 1972, by 1972 there were groups lobbying for childcare programs such as Community Coordination Child Care. By 1985 there were over a 100 providers.

Yet, this period of differentiation, consciousness raising, and organizational

experimentation was littered with “failures.” As with other new organizations such as Terrisquirma, and The Learning Community the new ventures were multi-level transformations, demanding on both the personal and professional level, attempting to turn a profit or make a go of it while conducting ongoing on-the-job therapy. Programs endured as long as possible, or in many cases served an entrepreneurial goal, inspiring or instigating changes at more enduring institutions. Portland State University, through its continuing education division, created a women’s program that began in 1967 and closed up shop in 1978. Its evolution was similar to other women’s organizations from this period. The intent of the program was to “help women who were seeking growth and development, who were searching for a more meaningful sense of ‘self-attainment,’ who were seeking professional guidance (McDermott, 1986).” As women’s needs changed, the program adapted, so that by the end, instead of teaching consciousness raising and feminist separatism, the program was teaching courses such as “In the Mainstream.”

By the early 1970s the change in women’s status was noticeable in the make-up of civic bodies in the City of Portland, but not dramatic,. In the 1960s only 120 of 711 appointments on civic bodies were women (17 percent). Between 1970 and 1979 279 of 1009 appointments were women (28 percent). The largest increase was in board licensing board memberships, followed by commission appointments. In all likelihood the changing board makeup reflected the increasing number of women in the workforce. The number of women on commissions increased because several commissions which formed during this time, such as the Commission on Aging, were in social service areas, where women have always been prominent.

The organizational development phase of the women’s movement in Portland

started in the early 1970s, and measured by the number of feminist-oriented organizations, reached its heyday in the late 1970s and 1980s. Women-published directories and yellow pages document a wealth of innovative new feminist enterprises. Women created media production groups (Changing Women Media Project), self defense programs (Defend Ourselves, Sunnyside Methodist Church), gathering places for women to meet without men (Arbuckle Flat), law assistance centers for women (Community Law Project, Women's Collective), women-centered publishing houses (Olive Press), a credit union (Oregon Federal Feminist Credit Union), and art galleries (Woman's Art Project). Women also created support and services for groups such as the Lesbian Parenting Alliance, laborers (Coalition of Labor Union Women), radical (Radical Women), Socialists (Socialist-Feminist Coordinating Committee), Native Americans (United Indian Women), vegetarians (Vegfem), human services (Women in Human Services), transitioning (Women in Transition), and employed (Women Employed). Instead of a handful of politically operative women's groups as there had been in 1960, by 1978 there were at least 60.

Traditional women's groups continued to function, but suffered declines in membership. The League of Women Voters hit an all time low membership in 1976, 300 members. And it was not alone. The membership of the Oregon Congress of Parents Teachers and Students dropped from 112,000 in 1965 to 37,000 in 1976. The Daughters of the Nile dropped from 5,000 in 1962 to 4,000 in 1976. Some groups, such as the Delphians, admitted that they were not just declining, but actually dying.

In addition to declining membership, traditional women's groups noted changes in how women wanted to participate in community life. "The job market," the director of

the Oregon Federation of Women's Clubs noted, "is one of the primary causes for the decline and change in how women are involved (Hofferber, 1976, p. C1). She observed that community work remained important, but added that more groups were involved in fundraising than service, because "working women just can't allocate the time for service." There was a new model for the active woman in the community. The director of the Women's Resource Center at the YWCA summarized it this way: "I think there are women who have a greater influence with the world and are not afraid of showing their strength. Traditionally women settled for having impact in their own small groups, but these women see that their influence can reach further (Heltzel, 1976), p.C2)."

While, there were more members of women's traditional civic groups, younger women in particular were not joining, and instead attended other forums, such as the Oregon Council for Women's Equality conference that drew 1400 women in 1976. By the mid 1970s the League of Women Voters no longer avoided the feminist or women's rights label, and took on issues that most directly affected women. Likewise the AAUW, with its 470-member base, began to take on issues with women-specific content, such as helping the YWCA's resource center develop a job bank geared toward employment for women. Other traditional women's civic organizations also responded to the expanded causes of women by adopting new issues. In 1985 for example, the Legal Secretaries Association sponsored a workshop on social issues as part of a campaign against domestic violence. Women's clubs, the mainstay of Portland's civic life in the 1950s, found it difficult to maintain their membership during the 1980s and 1990s. For example, the Oregon Federation of Women's Clubs saw its membership base decline from 1538 members in 1984, to 916 in 1994, to an all-time low of 277 in 2003. The number of clubs

statewide fell from 37 in 1994 to 21 in 2003.

In addition to women's clubs, other traditional women's groups suffered membership losses, or just ceased to exist. Only a handful of the larger organizations survived, such as the American Association of University Women, YWCA, and the League of Women Voters. These organizations tended to more flexible, taking on issues of the day, appealing to younger people, or creating services specifically for "liberated" women.

Beginning in the 1980s, women's groups increasingly faced challenges from conservative citizen interest groups that opposed abortion, and gay women faced similar challenges. In 1985, mail bombs were sent to four local abortion clinics, phone lines were cut at the Feminist Clinic, and there was an arson attempt at the Lovejoy Clinic, which provided abortions. In 1987, the Oregon Citizen's Alliance (OCA) was formed after the Portland City Council voted in a no discrimination policy for gay city workers. Throughout the 1990s the OCA tried repeatedly to pass laws to limit the rights of gay women and men. But, by the late 1990s, Portland was home to a sizable gay community. "It's common street knowledge that Portland is the lesbian capital of the nation," said Ann Mussey, assistant professor of women's studies at Portland State University. "I also have trans (gender) students and activists tell me that this is a very trans-friendly place, even more so than San Francisco (Sullivan, 2004, p. A6)."

By the end of the 1990s, many of the women-only organizations created in the late 1970s and 1980s had died. Their demise is due more to institutionalization than a failure of the women's movement. A directory to women's organizations published in the late 1970s listed over 100 nontraditional women's organizations. By the end of the

1990s less than 30 of those groups were still in existence. While some groups simply failed, many others transmuted into other organizations or found their agendas institutionalized. For example, there were a number of birthing centers created during the 1970s. Now, birth centers exist in many hospitals. Expectant mothers can choose between at least 50 locations in the Portland area that have midwives.

Specialization also occurred within the feminist community. There were many more business and professional organizations or services aimed at women. For example, Portland Oregon Women on the Web (POWW) provides a forum for women involved in Web-related technology to network, exchange job and business leads, form strategic alliances, mentor and teach, and learn skills to help each other succeed in an increasingly technical workplace and world. Advocates for Women in Science, Engineering, and Mathematics (AWSEM) advocates for young girls to pursue education and careers in science, engineering, math, and technology. Also, the Portland-Vancouver, Washington area has the highest percentage of women-owned businesses in the country (Center for Women's Business Research 2008). There are an estimated 100,000 women-owned firms in the Portland area, generating \$24 billion in sales and employing 196,000 people.