

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION OF UNIVERSITY WOMEN  
Notes From Jane Lancaster

The year is 1905. Higher education is opening up for women in the Pacific Northwest, graduating women whose ambitions and values are unlike their mothers'. It is an era when club membership and activism are growing side by side. Elizabeth Chapman Donald, one of that new generation of female college graduates, founds a local, women-only chapter of the Association of Collegiate Alumnae (the precursor to the American Association of University Women [AAUW]). Dubbed the "garden club of the educated," Portland's AAUW continues today as one of the grand old ladies of women's activism.

The mission of the Portland AAUW was very basic: to provide a place where women with college degrees could socialize with others and to raise money for a scholarship for a high school girl planning to go to "State University" in Eugene. Both goals were accomplished by staging amateur theatrical productions.

The AAUW women began to expand their activities beyond teas and luncheons. One of their first projects was to help raise funds for a women's building on the University of Oregon campus. During World War I, they planted victory gardens, worked as Red Cross volunteers and got involved with anything the local war effort had to offer. As war efforts wound down, their attention turned to world affairs. They wrote letters supporting the establishment of the League of Nations and the World Court. Local politics and education became permanent topics on their agenda.

Despite their interest in public affairs, the Portland AAUW was reluctant to engage in controversial political issues--including women's suffrage. In 1917, the Federal Suffrage amendment was gaining momentum and the AAUW national convention voted to support it. In Portland, the local branch voted to ignore three volatile issues: Suffrage, temperance and party-politics. Unfortunately, there is no written record of the discussion that led to these decisions and Oregon eventually supported the suffrage movement.

In 1918, the Portland branch joined with other women's organizations to raise money for the Waverly Baby Home. It maintained a hands-on role in its management until 1942.

In 1923 the national convention was held in Portland. One outcome of that convention was the addition of "study groups" to the branch agendas. Two initial studies were on early childhood education and international relations. By 1938 the groups were at a "level of serious study, befitting college women." Keeping adult education as a top priority, study groups moved in several directions. There were traditional "lady-like" groups studying creative arts, history and languages. Others took on economics, the growth in technology and censorship policies for the rapidly advancing print and movie medias.

Recognition that the Depression was not going away on its own, overpowered any reluctance to stay away from political controversy. The women began a letter writing campaign asking for federal government involvement. They passed resolutions favoring

single salary schedules for men and women, fought cuts in higher education and equal opportunity for women with regard to unemployment relief. By the late 1930s they were influential participants in the Portland community.

Similar letter-writing campaigns supported a vigorous peace movement prior to WWII. In 1940 the local chapter sold playing cards and tickets to a Summer Symphony to provide assistance to one university refugee woman. They were prepared to provide homes for refugee children.

In 1942 the local AAUW took on another activity. After sifting through possible ways to help the war effort, its members committed to assist the Red Cross at their Cantina in the Union Station. These women opened and maintained a baby lounge/nursery room for the comfort of mothers traveling with small children. Supplying and staffing the facility was probably the largest undertaking the Portland Branch had ever done.

The Terminal Company provided the room for baby lounge. Several organizations including the Red Cross and Kaiser Shipyard employees donated baby food, blankets and handmade clothing. The AAUW volunteers soon learned that its clientele was much greater than it had originally envisioned. One of only four such facilities in the United States, the baby lounge was a welcome refuge for those traveling across the country. Grandparents, fathers and friends of the family traveled with motherless children. Others came from foreign countries and were unable to speak English.

Through the daybooks kept by volunteers, we know they coped with flies, crying infants, dripping faucets, lost luggage, the dirt and boredom suffered by the travelers and, the crowds of several trains arriving at one time. Volunteers would dash out for simple necessities such as a needle and thread, flyswatters and cans of milk. Soiled clothing was exchanged--or given if there was a need. A small charge for food and services was collected from those able to pay; to others they were free.

Planned "to relieve some of the distress on those spending hours between trains on hard station benches with limited facilities for adults or children to rest," volunteers attended to at least 19,780 babies and children and 11,615 mothers during the years it operated. The project lasted until 1945. As need diminished, so did the time and energy of the many volunteers necessary to keep the baby room open. It was considered "a grand experience" by Mrs. R. Hoven, the last volunteer to record her shift. She closed the last journal writing that they (the AAUW volunteers) "had served their purpose."

After WWII, the AAUW returned their focus to childhood education and away from radical politics. In 1946, they joined the Junior League and several organizations to create a museum for children, "where boys and girls could see exhibits and experience music, arts and crafts first hand."

In 1947, with support from some local businesses, they shipped 7,000 shoeboxes filled with pencils, pens, notebooks, slates, picture books and maps to children in China,

Ethiopia and Korea. With the 1950s came the return of more social events, including teas to support local needs and charities.

In 1973, they published Land of the Multnomahs, a book about early Oregon. Written by fourteen AAUW members, proceeds from the sales of two printings went to beef up fellowship fund. The Portland AAUW was instrumental in starting Oregon's educational television channel and a non-profit clearinghouse for part-time jobs.

Political issues, followed less actively by the Portland branch, remain under the umbrella of the State and national organizations. Title IX and the concept of equity in athletics, the displaced homemaker bill and the inheritance tax law that made widows half owners of their husband's property are examples of issues that were high on the AAUW's watch.

A Legal Advocacy Fund was formed by the Association to provide funds and a support system for women seeking judicial redress for sex discrimination and the state organization maintains a part time lobbyist for issues related to their mission.

Today, local AAUW activities fall into four groups: community action and service, personal cultural development, international relations and education (from fellowships to educational information services to working with community libraries). The members continue to gather monthly to study and expand their interest in politics, literature, art, history, theater, and pursue interests in cooking and hiking. The current mission statement says that the AAUW advances equity for women and girls through advocacy, education and research. One AAUW axiom is: "Study without action is futile, action without study is fatal." No more a "garden club for the educated," the AAUW is now a "pen and microphone for women's issues."

Resources for this article came from the OREGONIAN and from WOMEN OF THIS WORLD, a history of the Portland Branch of the AAUW from 1905-1979, by Lynn Jordan, 1980.

For more information on the AAUW, please visit <http://www.aauw-oregon.org> or <http://www.aauw.org/> for the National Association.

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