

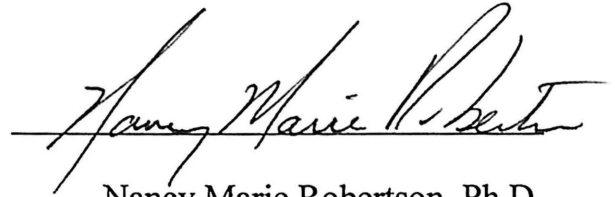
“A WORTHWHILE EXISTENCE”: THE CONSERVATISM AND CONSCIOUSNESS  
OF INDIANAPOLIS’S CLUBWOMEN, 1875-1920

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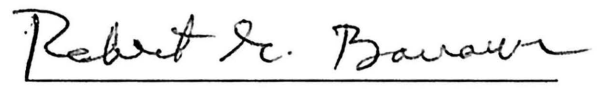
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## ABBREVIATIONS

**AWSA** -- American Woman's Suffrage Association

**GFWC** – General Federation of Women's Clubs

**ISFCWC** – Indiana State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs

**ISFWC** – Indiana State Federation of Women's Clubs

**IULC** – Indiana Union of Literary Clubs

**IWC** – Indianapolis Woman's Club

**NACW** – National Association of Colored Women's Clubs

**WCTU** – Women's Christian Temperance Union

**WIC** – Woman's Improvement Club

**WC** – Woman's Council

**YWCA** – Young Women's Christian Association

## Introduction

**“... I must say the Society has had a worthwhile existence. I recall its beginning with only a handful of girls each firmly impressed with the spirit of the cause, each trying by every effort to do something worthwhile . . .”**

-- Lola Steiert<sup>1</sup>

At the beginning of the twentieth century, thousands of American women stood united in similar beliefs and values regarding the role they could play in making society better. They believed they had the ability “to do something worthwhile” with their lives through club work. Yet race, ethnicity, social status, and a sense of conservatism hindered them from fully working together. This study examines three late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indianapolis women’s clubs. These clubs – the native-born, white Indianapolis Woman’s Club, the African-American Woman’s Improvement Club, and the German-American *Damenverein* – all ignored aspects of their middle-class value systems by meeting publicly, but overall retained traditional views on the proper role of women and did not typically cross racial or social boundaries to work with each other.

While their sense of conservatism stopped some of the women from fully expressing themselves and from working with each other, by coming together as

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<sup>1</sup> Lola Steiert, Founder’s Day Dinner Speech, c. 1929, Athenaeum Damenverein & Women’s Auxiliary Records, 1876-1999, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis Special Collections and Archives, University Library (hereafter, “IUPUI”).

*clubwomen* they proved that women have minds, opinions, and talents outside of the home. Regardless of the traditional gender ideologies that influenced these clubs, these women defied societal conventions regarding gender roles by uniting as clubwomen, not solely as mothers or wives. I argue that even while retaining conservative aspects within their clubs, these women ultimately helped redefine the definition of a “proper woman” by unintentionally challenging the status quo. They challenged conventional gender ideology by developing their own unique senses of female consciousness, which empowered them to create new roles for themselves outside of the home.

Having said that, tea and cake socials, children’s parties, and sport competitions are not the typical images most of us imagine when thinking about women who challenged oppressive gender and racial ideologies at the beginning of the twentieth century. Rather, we tend to envision well-dressed suffragists with purple sashes who marched down Pennsylvania Avenue in Washington, D.C., or women such as Ida B. Wells who valiantly spoke the truth about Jim Crow. If pressed hard enough, we might also imagine those “huddled masses” of foreign women who struggled to help legitimize America’s labor unions. Dynamic individuals living in dynamic times makes the history we remember.

Most women living around 1900, however, did not march in suffrage parades or confront social injustice with the bravado of a Wells. Nor were all immigrant women poor or concerned with the plight of labor. Many American women, including the women in this study, were middle-class wives and mothers who held traditional views on

women.<sup>2</sup> These women cautiously engaged in their public endeavors and never overtly tried to alter power relations between men and women. Their sense of conservatism demonstrated reluctance, for a variety of reasons discussed later, to break sharply from the status quo and manifested itself differently depending on the social forces at work within a particular group.

In describing these women as “middle-class,” I rely on the work of women’s historian Anne Firor Scott. Scott, in *Natural Allies*, addresses the contested issue of how to define “middle-class.” She writes, “Do we define ‘middle-class’ by income, by ‘relation to the means of production’? Or is it defined by a certain set of values, especially the drive for self-improvement, the high regard for work, and the concept of respectability?”<sup>3</sup> She argues that most women (white and black) involved in women’s clubs were “middle-class” by virtue of their activities and behaviors rather than incomes.<sup>4</sup> Gerda Lerner addresses this issue by stressing that black clubwomen were not considered middle-class by their white counterparts because most members of “middle-class” black

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<sup>2</sup> My study does not explore the lives of working-class women. For analyses on the impact of working-class women on American society, see Joanne Meyerowitz, *Women Adrift: Independent Wage Earners in Chicago, 1880-1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988) and Kathy Peiss, *Cheap Amusements: Working Women and Leisure in Turn-of-the-Century New York* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1986).

<sup>3</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 82.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 82-83.

families worked.<sup>5</sup> Within the black community, however, black clubwomen were considered middle-class because of their educational standing and high social status.<sup>6</sup>

I use the term “middle-class,” then, to indicate that within the Indianapolis Woman’s Club’s, Woman’s Improvement Club’s, and *Damenverein*’s parallel social worlds, the women came from and/or thought of themselves as coming from middle-class backgrounds.<sup>7</sup> This is to say the clubwomen, within their clubs, shared similar financial backgrounds, social expectations, and most importantly, ideals regarding respectability and propriety. They all subscribed to middle-class values and ideals although economically (and within the greater social world of Indianapolis) they looked quite different from each other. The social status attributed to being “middle-class” (or rather, class-privileged) is more important to this study than the actual material conditions of the clubwomen. Therefore, class analysis does not drive this study. Rather this study is driven by how these women adapted their understanding of their roles as (club)women based on their gender as well as their social, racial, and ethnic backgrounds.

This perspective is one of the ways this work differs from the work of other scholars. Additionally, most of the literature pertaining to women’s clubs and clubwomen focuses on literary/self-improvement clubs from the mid-nineteenth to the

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<sup>5</sup> Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 73.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

<sup>7</sup> Some of the women in the Indianapolis Woman’s Club were actually upper-class, but I argue that the *group* reflected and upheld various middle-class ideologies. Therefore, for the purposes of this paper, being “middle-class” has more to do with the relative social positioning of these women within their own racial or ethnic communities rather than with direct class comparisons between organizations.

early-twentieth centuries.<sup>8</sup> The particulars surrounding the motivations and activities of these clubs vary significantly, especially between native-born white and African-American women's clubs. Despite these differences, the literature stresses the autonomous nature of women's clubs from male or mixed-sex organizations as well as club affiliation, depending on race, with the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) or the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACW).<sup>9</sup> The majority of the literature defines clubwomen as middle-class women who united socially to discuss literature, improve their cultural standing, and (sometimes) engage in community service work.

This work challenges the conventional definition of "clubwoman" by asking about immigrant women, about whom little has been written, and African-American women, who had different ties to their communities than native-born white women. Moreover, this study explores how diverse groups of women compare when analyzed together. True, the Indianapolis Woman's Club and the Woman's Improvement Club met the criteria of literary clubs affiliated with the GFWC and NACW, respectively. Yet the level of community service work between the two clubs varied significantly, with the Woman's Improvement Club assisting the African-American community in ways far more pro-active than the activities of the Indianapolis Woman's Club. Should the

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<sup>8</sup> The literature pertaining to women's clubs is addressed in depth in Chapter 1.

<sup>9</sup> Some of the most noted works pertaining to clubwomen include, Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980); Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890-1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1990); Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies*; and Stephanie Shaw, "Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (Fall 1991): 10-25.



Woman's Improvement Club be considered more of a benevolent association? If so, how does one address the fact the members of the Woman's Improvement Club also commented on literature and presented papers during their meetings? The *Damenverein*, on the other hand, did not consider itself a literary club, although it operated a library and co-sponsored intellectual events, including writing competitions, for club members. Furthermore, the *Damenverein* did not affiliate with the GFWC (or the NACW) nor did the *Damenverein* exist autonomously. Yet, the women of the *Damenverein* were middle-class, literate, and active agents in their community.

To answer these types of questions, I use a definition of a clubwoman that is somewhat broader in scope than that in previous studies. First, I consider women's clubs as those organizations that evolved from early nineteenth-century benevolent societies into clubs that stressed self-improvement and various levels of community involvement. Therefore, "clubwomen" are those women who joined sex segregated clubs to effect some kind of change in their lives and/or communities and, based on common experiences, came to share a similar sense of female consciousness.<sup>10</sup> This definition simultaneously allows for the analysis of a diverse grouping of women's clubs while focusing on otherwise overlooked similarities. Furthermore, the region in which these women lived, the Midwest, greatly affected their outlooks.

Despite different racial, ethnic, class-privileged backgrounds, this definition of clubwomen allows for the study of common ground between the Indianapolis Woman's

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<sup>10</sup> In the case of the African-American women of the Woman's Improvement Club and German-American women of the *Damenverein*, a deep sense of ethnic/racial consciousness also informed their lives. This sense of dual consciousness based on ethnicity and gender helped these women build strong communal ties within their communities.

Club, Woman's Improvement Club, and *Damenverein*. For example, all these clubs shared similar organizational composition and leadership patterns. Additionally, similar cycles of events, club loyalty, and satisfaction in their accomplishments, especially regarding the creation of physical and social spaces for their club work, fostered an internal club culture where the women felt empowered and intelligent. At the same time, Indiana's traditional (pioneer) heritage coupled with Victorian notions of propriety, and in certain cases ethnic identity, created varying degrees of conservatism within the clubs.

The roots of conservatism within women's clubs go deep. In Indiana and elsewhere, male and female opponents of the early club movement found it wholly inappropriate for women to leave their domestic sphere for the "selfish" purpose of self-improvement and believed community improvement work should remain in the hands of male politicians. Many clubwomen shared some of these values and proudly clung to notions of femininity and "true womanhood" and believed men and women should operate in separate spheres of influence (i.e., the male sphere involved public business and traditional politics while the female sphere involved children and home life).<sup>11</sup> Clubwomen, therefore, often justified their public gatherings in each other's homes and churches by concentrating on benign literary subjects and by centering many of their community efforts on children, of whom (club)women were the "natural" caretakers.

How a sense of conservatism manifested itself differently based on the racial, ethnic, and social backgrounds of the women is more complex, however. For example, the native-born white women of the Indianapolis Woman's Club desired to maintain their

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<sup>11</sup> See Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979): 512-28, and Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 151-74.

privileged standing in society. As such, they went to great lengths to appear as true ladies in all situations and only rarely discussed or acted upon controversial topics. The African-American women of the Woman's Improvement Club also strove to meet the expectations of true womanhood. However, they did so because they wished to illustrate that African Americans in general, and black women in particular, were moral and intelligent. Fear of being cast as immoral, thereby giving racists the ammunition to further denigrate all African Americans, caused the women of the Woman's Improvement Club to exercise an accommodationist style of conservatism. As for the German-American women of the *Damenverein*, despite their affiliation with the politically liberal *Turners*, their cultural (i.e., patriarchal) backgrounds fostered a sense of ethnic traditionalism. Therefore, *Damenverein* members never attempted to form their own independent organization and never placed their needs as clubwomen above the needs of the (male) *Turnverein*.

Although these immigrant, native-born white, and black women exercised different forms of conservatism, the club life they shared afforded them the opportunity to engage in roles besides those of mother, daughter, or wife. In addition to creating new roles, the women of the Indianapolis Woman's Club, the Woman's Improvement Club, and the *Damenverein* created spaces in which they could freely interact and exert their influence. Perhaps most importantly, as their gender, racial, and ethnic identities became more pronounced and entwined with their club work, these seemingly "different" groups of clubwomen all developed a strong sense of female and, in the case of the *Damenverein* and Woman's Improvement Club, ethnic/racial consciousness. In other words, Indiana's clubwomen understood what society expected of them based on their sex, social identities

(class), and cultural traditions.<sup>12</sup>

By broadening the definition of clubwomen to include a variety of individuals who joined women's clubs and who felt a sense of consciousness based on their shared experiences as women, this study augments existing literature on women's clubs. It more fully explores the similarities and differences among clubwomen and allows a glimpse of how these women, who shared similar worldviews on the proper role of women, but had to meet different cultural expectations, met the challenges of club work and collectively impacted society. Additionally, by focusing on conservative women from Indiana, this study differs from the bulk of the literature, which concentrates on East Coast women who often embraced more radical club life.

To make my argument, I address in Chapter 1 the literature related to Victorian gender ideology and early women's organizations, the Midwest as a region, Indiana's history, and scholarship on women's clubs. Chapters 2 through 4 analyze the organizational structures, patterns of club work, and club member attitudes of those women belonging to the white, native-born Indianapolis Woman's Club, the African-American Woman's Improvement Club, and the German-American *Damenverein*, respectively. Each club had its own history and purpose. Yet their members all shared a sense of club consciousness based on their cultural backgrounds as well as their gender. What these groups of women did not say or do is also quite important. Not only does their occasional silence and inaction deepen an understanding of their conservative sides,

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<sup>12</sup> Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7 (Spring 1982): 545-66. Kaplan's concept of "female consciousness" plays a major role in this thesis as I find it an incredibly useful tool in analyzing how gender affects all women regardless of race or ethnicity.

but it also reveals the coping strategies they employed to maintain the status quo or to keep the peace within their clubs.

My analysis of these three clubs encompasses the years 1875 to 1920. American women's clubs grew in popularity during the 1870s and their numbers increased accordingly. (For example, both the Indianapolis Woman's Club and the *Damenverein* formed around 1875.<sup>13</sup>) By the 1920s, many changes had occurred in the lives of women, including the right to vote, prohibition, and expanded educational opportunities. Although each of the clubs in this study remained active and intact well beyond 1920, I end the analysis in 1920 because many of the influential Victorian notions that existed in the "early days" ceased to influence younger women who, based on numerous social factors, were joining in smaller and smaller numbers. Moreover, the reform and charitable work sometimes performed by women's clubs eventually became professionalized as agencies such as the Children's Bureau, YWCA, Urban League, and National Association for the Advancement of Colored People assumed greater prominence in society. Younger club members simply experienced a different kind of life as compared to the women of their mother's generation and, subsequently, women's clubs declined in importance and size.<sup>14</sup>

Although women's clubs declined in the early-twentieth century, it should be remembered that the actions of early clubwomen helped pave the way for a younger

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<sup>13</sup> Large numbers of African Americans did not arrive in Indiana or form a middle-class segment until well after the Civil War. The Woman's Improvement Club did not form until 1903.

<sup>14</sup> In addition, nativism during World War I reduced the numbers of those willing to participate in anything German-related and the *Damenverein* suffered accordingly. Moreover, the concept of joining woman's club was hardly as radical in 1920 as it was in 1875.

generation of women to become more vocal in politics, to more easily obtain college degrees, and to live the lives they wanted to live. While it might seem easy to write these domestically minded clubwomen off as contributing little to women's history, their reserved progressivism implicitly challenged traditional gender norms. By branching out of their private domestic realms, in essence, by turning private matters into public ones, they set the groundwork for future feminist ideologies.

Early women's clubs did have a "worthwhile existence" and without these early clubwomen – even the conservative ones who did not march in suffrage parades, assail the government for its racism, or loosen the ties of Old World gender norms, but instead "only" gathered to talk, write, debate, and educate themselves on the world around them – future generations of women would not know the freedoms they have today.

## Chapter 1 – Literature Review

Since my analysis is concerned not only with Indianapolis's clubwomen, but also gender ideologies, class privilege, race, ethnicity, and the Midwest as a region, this literature review serves as an overview of the important works of scholarship that address these areas. Of the many factors that molded the lives of American and Hoosier clubwomen, a societal discourse concerning women's roles stands at the top. The literature concerning early- and mid-nineteenth century women's roles must be approached with the understanding that most of the women in these studies are white, middle-class, Protestant, and from the Northeast. Regardless, this literature is useful in understanding nineteenth-century ideologies concerning gender roles and illuminates the context in which "womanhood" was defined for all women.

In her classic 1966 article, "The Cult of True Womanhood," Barbara Welter argues that according to common gender role beliefs, women needed to be pious, pure, submissive, and inclined to domestic life if they wished to experience happiness.<sup>1</sup> Legitimate options open to "respectable" women included only the domestic roles of wife and mother. Within these prescribed roles, women found they could unite around the

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<sup>1</sup> See Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860," *American Quarterly* 18 (Summer 1966): 152.

common identity of their sex. In other words, gender emerged as one of *the* defining forces in the lives of women, especially white, middle-class women. As such, women began to realize that from within their private and proper “woman’s sphere,” they could exert an influence over the domestic realm and thereby indirectly over the public realm. Taken a step further, as pure and wholesome creatures drawn toward good works within the home, should not women leave the home in order to directly make the public world a more moral place for their families?<sup>2</sup>

Two books that create a backdrop for how and why clubwomen living in this ideological context first united are *The Bonds of Womanhood* by Nancy Cott and Lori Ginzberg’s *Women and the Work of Benevolence*.<sup>3</sup> Cott asserts a “woman’s sphere” of domestic activity (and expectations) created a sense of “sisterhood” among women. This sense of common identity was a necessary precursor to women’s involvement in the public sphere. Ginzberg’s analysis begins where Cott’s ended (the mid-nineteenth century) and acknowledges that the ideology of a “woman’s sphere” shaped women. However, she concludes that such rhetoric was more about economic class than gender. Ginzberg argues that as women slowly began to exert themselves in the public sphere, the newly emerging middle-class struggled to define itself as a distinct American class. Subsequently, the rhetoric concerning good works and benevolence changed over the course of the nineteenth century and eventually linked middle-class respectability, via the

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<sup>2</sup> Welter points out that the cult of true womanhood carried within itself the seeds of its own destruction due to this very question.

<sup>3</sup> Nancy Cott, *The Bonds of Womanhood: “Woman’s Sphere” in New England, 1780-1835* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1977) and Lori D. Ginzberg, *Women and the Work of Benevolence: Morality, Politics, and Class in the Nineteenth-Century United States* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1990).



virtue of its women, to benevolent work outside the home.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, as Nancy Hewitt argues in *Women's Activism and Social Change*, a sense of social class based on the economic standing of fathers and husbands shaped the activities of clubwomen and even determined which groups of women worked together.<sup>5</sup> Depending on the social and economic backgrounds of early activist women, their socially minded efforts reflected the avenues of power and material resources available via their male connections.<sup>6</sup>

While relationships built on economic class and social standing often kept diverse groups of women apart, they did help women of similar backgrounds in the early to mid-nineteenth century develop a sense of solidarity despite a restrictive culture that stressed domesticity. As women united in benevolent or moral reform work, they began to desire more for themselves, especially those who viewed club work as a way to receive an education that, as women, had been denied to them. Additionally, as Kathleen McCarthy stresses, women of the early to mid-nineteenth century discovered that philanthropic work gave them license to move about the public sphere as they pleased.<sup>7</sup> Going a step further, Estelle Freedman argues in "Separatism as Strategy" that segregated women's clubs allowed women to form strong homosocial networks that in turn allowed them to

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<sup>4</sup> Not all historians agree with the significance of "women's spheres." See Linda Kerber, "Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History," *Journal of American History* 75 (June 1988): 9-39. I find the concept of women's spheres a useful analytical tool, especially when considering the nature of women's clubs and the women who took pride in their "women only" organizations.

<sup>5</sup> Nancy Hewitt, *Women's Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984), 21-23, 63.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

<sup>7</sup> Kathleen D. McCarthy, "Parallel Power Structures: Women and the Voluntary Sphere" (New York: Center for the Study of Philanthropy, Graduate School and University Center, City University of New York, 1988), 12.

create their own unique public spheres of action.<sup>8</sup> Analyses such as these shed light on the centrality of gender consciousness to the women's club movement.

Other historians, such as Karen Blair in *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, have explored clubwomen of a later period.<sup>9</sup> Blair traces the development of women's clubs and the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) to argue that the women's club movement was a form of "domestic feminism" and most clubwomen were feminists "under their skin."<sup>10</sup> Essentially, contends Blair, by leaving the domestic sphere -- whether for self-improvement or to engage in reform work -- clubwomen exerted a kind of feminism whether they intended to or not. Although not all women were radical enough to support suffrage or equal rights, many women, according to Blair, "employed the lady's traits to justify their departure from the home to exert special influence on the male sphere."<sup>11</sup> The women exerted a moral influence derived from a sense of inner feminism and a sense that the true womanhood ideal necessitated their involvement outside the home. Building on Welter's work, Blair contends club work appealed to women because it seemed a natural extension of their "womanly" duties. By actively engaging in club work, women also actively engaged in redefining the concept of womanhood.

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<sup>8</sup> Estelle Freedman, "Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930," *Feminist Studies* 5 (Fall 1979): 512-28.

<sup>9</sup> Karen J. Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1980).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 1. Blair relies heavily on Daniel Scott Smith's term "domestic feminism" from his article, "Family Limitation, Sexual Control, and Domestic Feminism in Victorian America," in *Clio's Consciousness Raised*, ed. Mary Hartman and Lois W. Banner (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 119-36.

<sup>11</sup> Blair, *Clubwoman as Feminist*, 4.

In *Natural Allies*, Anne Firor Scott, like Blair, emphasizes the idea that women actively redefined the concept of “womanhood.”<sup>12</sup> Scott states, “women, constrained by law and custom, and denied access to most of the major institutions by which the society governed itself . . . used voluntary associations to evade some of these constraints and to redefine ‘woman’s place.’”<sup>13</sup> Differing from Blair, Scott does not explicitly rely on the concept of domestic feminism. Instead, Scott highlights the importance religion played in the lives of white and black clubwomen and defines club life more broadly than Blair.<sup>14</sup> According to Scott, religion helped women focus on social problems and their responsibilities to society. Moreover, she argues that mission societies and organizations such as the Women’s Christian Temperance Union (WCTU) and the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) played pivotal roles in allowing women to grapple with social and political issues and to become more involved in secular affairs.<sup>15</sup> Unlike traditional churches, the WCTU and the YWCA granted women the chance to develop their own agendas without placing limits on their abilities or authority.

Scott also impresses upon the reader that the evolution of women’s clubs from benevolent societies to self-improvement clubs to community service organizations was

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<sup>12</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>14</sup> For a view of religion’s earlier influence on activist women and the role anger played in motivating the organizational efforts of early nineteenth-century (white) women, see Barbara Leslie Epstein, *The Politics of Domesticity: Women, Evangelism, and Temperance in Nineteenth-Century America* (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1981).

<sup>15</sup> Scott, *Natural Allies*, 85-110.

not a simple progression.<sup>16</sup> Women, especially middle-class white women, sometimes took quite a bit of time to notice and then care about the social problems around them. As a part of the dominant class, these women's lives simply were not touched by many of the social issues that affected even wealthy black and immigrant communities.

Ironically, although Blair and Scott discuss the influences and work of literary-minded clubwomen, they do not address their actual literary activities. Anne Ruggles Gere, in *Intimate Practices*, argues that the literary nature of women's clubs is paramount to understanding how clubwomen made "their own history and defin[ed] their own cultural identity."<sup>17</sup> Gere believes clubwomen viewed literacy as more than reading. They also viewed literacy as writing. Through their club papers, meticulous minutes, and official publications, such as club histories and memorials, clubwomen created an "imagined community" that stretched across the United States and united women from all walks of life.<sup>18</sup> Black or white, foreign- or native-born, America's clubwomen used literature to express their values, share their concerns, and shape a national discourse on the ailments facing society. Additionally, all groups of women -- black, white, and immigrant -- used their literary efforts to shape "official" versions of themselves.

While Gere and Scott address black and white (and, in Gere's case, immigrant) women, the writings of other historians discussed thus far fail to focus much attention on black or foreign-born women. As alluded to earlier, most theories concerning the cult of true womanhood, domesticity, and class ideology reflect a middle-class, white, native-

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>17</sup> Anne Ruggles Gere, *Intimate Practices: Literary and Cultural Work in U.S. Women's Clubs, 1880-1920* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 2.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 21.

born outlook. Stating that notions of respectability or middle-class definitions of class identity affected all women in the same way, regardless of race or ethnicity, would be an overstatement. However, the dominant ideology and discourse of much of the nineteenth century concerned itself with gender.<sup>19</sup> As such, few individuals could totally escape their impact. Black or immigrant women did not experience “womanhood” in exactly the same way as middle-class, native-born white women. Culturally constructed definitions and ideologies concerning gender, however, influenced all women and, to a degree, all women lived within those gendered terms.<sup>20</sup>

Appropriately, writings on black and immigrant women reflect not only the role gender and class played in shaping women’s consciousness and activities, but also the role of ethnicity. The works on black and other ethnic clubwomen include Stephanie Shaw’s, “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women.”<sup>21</sup> Shaw posits that black women have historically united in organizations and clubs to serve their community. Shaw even goes so far as to say that any historical scholarship on black clubwomen that links their activism solely to increased incidents of violence and sexual degradation during the so-called “nadir” of black history is seriously

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<sup>19</sup> I am using the term “dominant ideology” to mean an ideology that captures a culture’s worldview at a particular time and place and attempts to establish a desired consensus on how life should be lived.

<sup>20</sup> Ruth M. Alexander, “‘We Are Engaged as a Band of Sisters’: Class and Domesticity in the Washingtonian Temperance Movement, 1840-1850,” *Journal of American History* 75 (December 1988): 763-85, argues the language of domesticity influenced multiple segments of society and not only the middle class.

<sup>21</sup> Stephanie J. Shaw, “Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women,” *Journal of Women’s History* 3 (Fall 1991): 10-25.

flawed.<sup>22</sup> Shaw states the black women's clubs of the Progressive Era were an extension of the internal traditions of the black community -- traditions of self-help, racial uplift, and collective consciousness. These traditions went back to the days of slavery and demonstrate that black clubwomen engaged in community service work from the inception of their organization.<sup>23</sup>

Shaw develops her argument about the continuity of black community work by synthesizing the works of other historians. On the other hand, Dorothy Salem in *To Better Our World*, analyzes primary sources related to black women's club work and presents a comprehensive history of black women in organized groups.<sup>24</sup> Salem stresses that black women shared similar concerns with white women about club work, self-improvement, morality, suffrage, and temperance. However, their race consciousness shaped their attitudes and goals in unique ways and caused the National Association of Colored Women (NACW), unlike the (white) General Federation of Women's Clubs

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 10. Shaw points to the works of scholars such as Cynthia Neverdon-Morton, *Afro-American Women of the South and the Advancement of the Race, 1895-1925* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989); Darlene Clark Hine, *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women's Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1950* (Indianapolis: National Council of Negro Women, 1981); Erlene Stetson, "Black Feminism in Indiana, 1893-1933," *Phylon* 64 (December 1983): 292-98; Wilson Jeremiah Moses, "Domestic Feminism, Conservatism, Sex Roles, and Black Women's Clubs, 1893-1896," *Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences* 24 (Fall 1987): 166-77, and others as concentrating too much on racist and sexist slurs made against black women during the 1890s as impetus to the founding of the National Association of Colored Women.

<sup>23</sup> Shaw, "Black Club Women," 11.

<sup>24</sup> Dorothy Salem, *To Better Our World: Black Women in Organized Reform, 1890-1920*, published in *Black Women in United States History*, Darlene Clark Hine, ed., vol. 14 (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1990).

(GFWC), to become an organization for racial advancement on top of self-improvement.<sup>25</sup> For example, in the second half of her book, Salem focuses on the “change in direction” black women’s work underwent after 1910.<sup>26</sup> As racial tensions grew in America and as the accommodationist tactics of Booker T. Washington fell from favor, black women became more political. Black women were integral in the establishment of the NAACP and the Urban League. Furthermore, they continued to press for a greater voice in the YWCA and engaged in more anti-lynching work. In 1912, the NACW officially endorsed the suffrage amendment.<sup>27</sup>

Neither Shaw nor Salem uses the concept of domestic feminism when analyzing the involvement of black women in club work. There are those scholars, however, who have attempted to connect domestic feminism to the black club movement. In “Domestic Feminism, Conservatism, Sex Roles and Black Women’s Clubs, 1893-1896,” Wilson Jeremiah Moses states that black clubwomen “attempted to rationalize their desire for activism and social involvement in a manner consistent with their essentially conservative [i.e., Victorian] values.”<sup>28</sup> Moses argues black women believed in the essence of “true womanhood” and did not try to reshape the social construction of “woman” in American society. Instead, black women saw their primary responsibility as that of encouraging the masses of underprivileged blacks in America to adopt Victorian

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 103-44.

<sup>27</sup> Incidentally, NACW’s endorsement of the suffrage amendment took place two years before the GFWC officially endorsed the same measure.

<sup>28</sup> Wilson Jeremiah Moses, “Domestic Feminism, Conservatism, Sex Roles, and Black Women’s Clubs, 1893-1896,” *Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences* 24 (Fall 1987): 176.



mores.<sup>29</sup> If the masses reformed their sexual behavior, then perhaps white Americans would see middle-class black women in a different light and would be more willing to accept them into the mainstream of society.

Moses's argument is somewhat similar to the arguments of Blair and Scott. All three believe women operated within their "womanly spheres" so as to exercise a form of domestic feminism. Wilson also argues that black women were not seen as "women" or "ladies" in the Victorian sense of the word. Therefore, black middle-class women felt it important to uplift the masses and create a more positive (i.e., moral) view of black Americans, especially black women, in society. However, Moses, unlike Shaw and Scott, does not see the domestic feminism of black women as an integral component of how black women redefined womanhood.

Scholarly literature regarding immigrant women focuses primarily on poor, working-class women. Still useful to this study, these sources, such as *Foreign and Female* by Doris Weatherford, illustrate how immigrant women faced the challenges of a new country and combined old traditions with new realities.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, scholars such as Maxine S. Sellar contend that immigrant women, like their native-born white and black counterparts, were active and influential forces in their communities.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>30</sup> Doris Weatherford, *Foreign and Female: Immigrant Women in America, 1840-1930* (New York: Schocken Books, 1986).

<sup>31</sup> Maxine S. Sellar, "Beyond the Stereotype: A New Look at the Immigrant Woman, 1880-1924," *Journal of Ethnic Studies* 3 (Spring 1975): 59-70; reprinted in *American Immigration and Ethnicity*, Vol. 12, *Ethnicity and Gender: The Immigrant Woman*, George Pozzetta, ed. (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991).



While a small amount of scholarship related to female and German immigrants exists, little work concentrates on the specific experiences of German women, especially clubwomen.<sup>32</sup> One scholar who has tackled the issue of German-American women, however, is Christiane Harzig. In “Creating a Community: German-American Women in Chicago,” Harzig’s essay contribution in *Peasant Maids, City Women*, the author compares rural German women from the town of Micklenburg to their urban counterparts in Chicago during the turn of the last century.<sup>33</sup> Harzig concludes that the American experience allowed immigrant women to renegotiate gender relations because of the social and economic changes taking place within their families.<sup>34</sup> This meant that women often worked outside the home, formed their own clubs and aid societies, and combined leisure with cultural celebrations without becoming “flaming feminists,” but by becoming less bound to patriarchal traditions than their rural European counterparts.<sup>35</sup>

In another piece entitled, “The Role of German Women in the German-American Working-Class Movement in Late Nineteenth-Century New York,” Harzig argues that

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<sup>32</sup> See Melvin G. Holli and Peter d’A. Jones, eds., *The Ethnic Frontier: Essays in the History of Group Survival in Chicago and the Midwest* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1977); George Pozzetta, ed., *American Immigration and Ethnicity*, Vol. 12, *Ethnicity and Gender: The Immigrant Woman* (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1991); Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2000); Barbara Wiedermann-Citera, “The Role of the German-American *Verein* in the Revitalization of German-American Ethnic Life in New York City in the 1920s,” *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 29 (1994): 107-16.

<sup>33</sup> Christiane Harzig, “Creating a Community: German-American Women in Chicago,” in *Peasant Maids, City Women: From European Countryside to Urban America*, ed. Christiane Harzig, et al. (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1997), 185-222.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 185.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 222.

circumstances forced many (working-class) German women to shape their own realities and become involved in organized endeavors that would have been unheard of in their villages back in Germany.<sup>36</sup> At the same time, these women often had to walk a fine line while agitating for their rights *and* striving to maintain a strong sense of ethnic heritage based on traditional male/female relations.<sup>37</sup>

Although the literature on German-American clubwomen is quite limited, the few pieces written on the subject are quite useful because they demonstrate how immigrant (German) women had a tremendous amount of agency and helped create a sense of cohesion in their communities. Whether discussing immigrant women who joined literary clubs or labor unions, analyses such as these help demonstrate the important role immigrant women played in their communities. Additionally, these sources also explore how, regardless of their social or economic backgrounds, many immigrant women exercised a form of conservatism based on their cultural backgrounds.

While gender ideology, class, race, and ethnicity certainly shaped the lives of the clubwomen in this study, Indiana's traditional pioneer heritage also had an influence. How these women set about their tasks as *Hoosier* women is just as important as the ideological context in which they developed as clubwomen. A brief look at the Midwest as a region and Indiana's history, in particular, is needed to put these women into their

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<sup>36</sup> Christiane Harzig, "The Role of German Women in the German-American Working-Class Movement in Late Nineteenth-Century New York," *Journal of American Ethnic History* 8 (Spring 1989): 87-107.

<sup>37</sup> See Christiane Harzig, "The Ethnic Female Public Sphere: German-American Women in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago," in *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads*, ed. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Wendy Hamand Venet (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 141-57, for another example of Harzig's argument that German-American women struggled to advance their rights while trying to maintain certain traditional aspects of their heritage.

historical context and to understand the importance of regionalism when analyzing women's clubs.

In 1787 the new American government issued the Northwest Ordinance, a document that shaped the geography of the future Midwest and determined the make-up of its first "American" settlers. In *The Midwest and the Nation*, Andrew R.L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf explore how the Northwest Ordinance encouraged emigration by liberalizing voting rights for white men and by allowing a great deal of *local* governmental control.<sup>38</sup> Cayton and Onuf argue that the individuals who moved "west" held deep the belief they could make better lives for themselves if they worked hard and improved the land, and government stayed out of the way. Additionally, because the government sought to recruit enterprising and "virtuous" citizens into this new territory, it implicitly encouraged settlers who were market-driven and extremely individualistic. Not surprisingly, argue Cayton and Onuf, a laissez-faire attitude developed in multiple areas of midwestern life and this attitude is what shaped a distinctive midwestern character.<sup>39</sup>

John Mack Faragher posits in *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* that strong distinctions between midwestern men's and women's work also developed during the pioneer era, with women performing the same sex-segregated tasks whether in their fathers' or husbands' homes.<sup>40</sup> Pioneer women had little, if any, contact with the public

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<sup>38</sup> Andrew R.L. Cayton and Peter S. Onuf, *The Midwest and the Nation: Rethinking the History of an American Region* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 1-9.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, xvii.

<sup>40</sup> John Mack Faragher, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven, CN: Yale University Press, 1979), 50-65.

world and experienced life as structured around private family and personal relationships. Gender ideologies that emerged in the pioneer era influenced future generations of Hoosiers to believe men and women should operate within distinctly different realms of work and socialization.

Attitudes regarding gender relations were not the only attitudes to influence later Hoosiers. For example, as James Madison illustrates in *The Indiana Way*, although Indiana industrialized after the Civil War, few Hoosiers wanted to think of Indiana as anything other than an agricultural state.<sup>41</sup> Consequently, many refused to believe Indiana faced the same urban problems as the rest of the nation. As these problems became unavoidable, Indiana's strong tradition of government non-intervention constituted a major roadblock to reform, which limited the opinions, actions, and level of community involvement of some clubwomen. Midwest-oriented analyses such as these illuminate how the dominant ideology that developed in Indiana had a decidedly agrarian slant that placed value on traditional notions of hard work, individual responsibility, little government involvement, and strict gender roles.

The hard-working, entrepreneurial, rugged pioneers deliberately recruited into early Indiana did not include African-Americans or foreign immigrants. These minority groups did make their way into early Indiana, however. As Emma Lou Thornbrough demonstrated in her classic 1957 work, *The Negro in Indiana before 1900*, records from the French settlement of Vincennes prove blacks had lived in Indiana since the mid-

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<sup>41</sup> James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 163. Madison reports Indiana was the eighth largest industrial state in the nation at the turn of the twentieth century.

1700s.<sup>42</sup> Yet unknown to many is the fact the earliest black residents of Indiana were slaves. The Northwest Ordinance (Article VI) had stated there should “. . . be neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . .” in the new territory. Nevertheless, early Hoosiers did not interpret this clause as retroactive and slaves brought into Indiana before 1787 remained slaves. Indiana’s first Constitution of 1816 reiterated the spirit of the Northwest Ordinance and forbade slavery. Yet small pockets of slavery existed in Indiana until the 1830s.<sup>43</sup>

Early Indiana never developed an inclusive attitude toward its black residents. The 1851 Constitution (Article XIII) asserted, “no negro [sic] or mulatto shall come into or settle in the state, after the adoption of the Constitution.” In addition, the Constitution voided all contracts between whites and blacks and imposed penalties against those who hired black workers. Despite these restrictions, manumitted slaves remained in, or slowly migrated to, Indiana. The earliest of these individuals farmed the land and built their own communities, churches, and schools. In certain respects, black pioneers carried out their daily lives no differently than their white counterparts and were subsequently shaped by Indiana’s pioneer culture as well.

Clearly, the image of Indiana as a “free state” that produced anti-slavery individuals such as Abraham Lincoln and Underground Railroad supporter Levi Coffin is not entirely accurate. This understanding is important because the consequences of an

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<sup>42</sup> Emma Lou Thornbrough, *The Negro in Indiana before 1900: A Study of a Minority* (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Bureau, 1957), 1.

<sup>43</sup> Madison, *The Indiana Way*, 54. This discussion is not meant to suggest large numbers of slaves lived in Indiana. The 1810 census reports 237 out of 630 blacks living in Indiana were slaves and the 1820 census reported 1,420 blacks in Indiana. See Emma Lou Thornbrough, “African Americans,” in *Peopling Indiana*, ed. Robert M. Taylor, Jr. and Connie A. McBirney (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1996), 12-13.

anti-black background shaped race relations in Indiana during the Progressive Era and influenced the “acceptable” areas of work done by all women.

A few historians have explored the connections between African Americans and the Midwest. One scholar who explores the dimensions of African-American migration and life in diverse midwestern areas is Joe William Trotter, Jr. In *River Jordan*, Trotter discusses four urban centers -- Pittsburgh, Cincinnati, Louisville, and Evansville -- from colonial times to the mid-twentieth century.<sup>44</sup> He concentrates on these cities because they all thrived along the Ohio River, which Trotter contends “holds great symbolic significance in African American history [because it] represented the boundary between slavery and freedom . . . [and later] the division between the Jim Crow South and the urban North.”<sup>45</sup>

Using secondary sources almost entirely, Trotter’s book is a synthesis of existing scholarship on African-American urban history. He argues that all midwestern blacks experienced some kind of discrimination and fragmentation based on issues of color and economic class, but succeeded in building communities that often bridged such differences when possible and advantageous.

Ultimately, economic class analysis drives Trotter’s synthesis. He is primarily interested in how industrial capitalism shaped the black urban experience by presenting blacks with greater opportunities combined with fresh modes of resistance.<sup>46</sup> Trotter

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<sup>44</sup> Joe William Trotter, Jr., *River Jordan: African American Urban Life in the Ohio Valley* (Lexington: The University Press of Kentucky, 1998).

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii. I include this book in the historiography on the Midwest because the Ohio River was an integral component in the development of the Midwest and some Ohio Valley states (Indiana and Ohio) clearly fall into a “midwestern” category.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

demonstrates that whites created new barriers to employment and housing as the number of African Americans increased along the Ohio Valley and in the rest of the Midwest. In spite of these obstacles, black urban workers used their expanded footing in the urban economy to create their own communities and services. For example, members of the black community pooled their money to create churches and schools, to form fledgling civil rights organizations, and even to slowly turn their own businesses into services that catered to working-class blacks instead of middle-class whites.<sup>47</sup> According to Trotter, these actions constituted a new kind of resistance, the resistance of success, and the Midwest as a region, because of its geography and traditional emphasis on hard work, provided the best opportunities in the country for success.

In both *The Negro in Indiana before 1900* and *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century*, Emma Lou Thornbrough, like Trotter, demonstrates that community building became the hallmark of African-American progress and success in the Midwest.<sup>48</sup> *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* continues Thornbrough's original work. Thornbrough discusses (urban) life in Indiana during the early to mid 1900s, a time she calls the age of accommodation. During this time a small business and professional class emerged, especially along Indianapolis's Indiana Avenue. Social and cultural clubs flourished with more and more African Americans joining church organizations, women's clubs, and fraternal groups. As the number of blacks increased in Indiana during the Great Migration, established blacks worried that the influx would agitate white

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 73-78.

<sup>48</sup> Emma Lou Thornbrough, *Indiana Blacks in the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).



racism. Correspondingly, an aura of accommodation prevailed in the middle-class black community during the early twentieth century.

Concerning the experiences of black women who migrated to the Midwest, Darlene Clark Hine, in her essay “Black Migration to the Urban Midwest,” explores the motivating forces and role of gender in migration.<sup>49</sup> Hine claims economic reasons alone did not inspire women to migrate. Rather, she suggests many African-American women migrated to the Midwest because they wished to be free of “sexual exploitation both within and outside of their families and from the sexual abuse at the hands of southern white as well as black men.”<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Hine emphasizes the important role women played in establishing kinship networks that encouraged new migration and supported newly arrived family members. By studying such efforts on the part of black women, Hine underscores the agency of black women and the influence they had in shaping black (urban) communities in the Midwest. Hine’s scholarship and the work of those who explore the Midwest and its inhabitants illustrate how different midwestern communities formed within the context of a conservative state. Yet, the Midwest also allowed new inhabitants, even if in varying degrees, a greater sense of autonomy and control over their communities.

Native-born whites and African Americans were not the only people who ventured into Indiana, but unlike other states created from the Northwest Territory,

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<sup>49</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, “Black Migration to the Urban Midwest: The Gender Dimension, 1915-1945,” in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 87-107.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.



Indiana's legislature reluctantly spent money recruiting immigrant laborers.<sup>51</sup> In spite of the lack of "pull factors" drawing immigrants to Indiana, many Germans moved to the area during the early- and mid-nineteenth century and eventually constituted the largest immigrant group in the state. Early German settlers sought to retain their heritage by maintaining social and religious traditions, speaking the German language, and celebrating German music. At the same time, their belief in hard work and desire to make better (financial) lives for themselves and their families fit in well with the prevailing pioneer attitude in Indiana.

Early German immigrants to Indiana did not suffer the same indignities faced by African Americans, but many native Hoosiers still perceived them as "different." Traditionally, the Sabbath in Germany constituted a day of worship *and* recreation -- a time to fully enjoy the fruits of one's labor with family and friends. Many evangelical Protestants in early Indiana found such a concept sacrilegious. To combat such "corruption," local governments passed Sabbatarian laws in attempt to limit Sunday recreational activities. In 1837 laws passed in Indianapolis fined a person one dollar if caught playing certain ball games on Sunday. A similar statewide Sabbath Law took effect in 1855.<sup>52</sup> Furthermore, many native Hoosiers supported the temperance movement that began in the 1830s. To the Germans, who enjoyed a good beer in the company of family and friends, these restrictive laws seemed an affront not only to their customs, but also to the very spirit of American democracy. To compound

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<sup>51</sup> John Bodnar, "Ethnic History in America and Indiana," in Taylor and McBirney, eds., *Peopling Indiana*, 5.

<sup>52</sup> Madison, *The Indiana Way*, 105.

problems, the 1850s saw the rise of the nativist Know-Nothing Party.<sup>53</sup> Nativism often existed as a forceful sentiment German Americans had to overcome, especially during the height of the Know-Nothing Party and later during World War I.

Authors who have explored German-American communities include Don Heinrich Tolzmann and George Theodore Probst. *The German-American Experience* by Tolzmann and *The Germans in Indianapolis* by Probst each present straightforward histories of the German immigrant experience, especially concerning the *Verein* – or German social/community club.<sup>54</sup> Tolzmann contends German-American families were, for the most part, traditional and patriarchal. Whole families participated in church and club life to preserve their cultural heritage. These clubs often did not concern themselves with social matters outside the German community, as many German immigrants saw the imposition of values (i.e., reform work) as an affront to democracy.<sup>55</sup> Probst also discusses the *Verein*-life of German-American immigrants. However, Probst concentrates more of his study on liberal-minded organizations, such as the *Turners*, and how their local community efforts eventually affected the whole of Indianapolis.<sup>56</sup> A

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<sup>53</sup> Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience* (Amherst, N.Y.: Humanity Books, 2000). According to Tolzmann (p. 200), that the American Party or Know-Nothings was a xenophobic group who pretended ignorance when asked questions about politics or goals of the organization, hence their nickname.

<sup>54</sup> Tolzmann, *The German-American Experience* and Theodore Probst, *The Germans in Indianapolis: 1840-1918*, rev. and ed., Eberhard Reichmann (Indianapolis: German-American Center and Indiana German Heritage Society, 1989).

<sup>55</sup> Tolzmann, *The German-Americans*, 232-33.

<sup>56</sup> For a concise history of the American Turner movement with particular emphasis on Turner ideology and physical education accomplishments in American schools, see Robert Knight Barney, “Forty-Eighters and the Rise of the Turnverein Movement in America,” in *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*, ed. George Eisen and David K. Wiggins (Westport, CN: Greenwood Press, 1994), 19-38.

common theme of both works is that German Americans believed a strong cultural heritage could be maintained while being a good American.

Germans and African Americans in Indiana adapted to many of the obstacles placed in the path of their individual freedom. For all of its positive aspects, including belief in hard work and individual responsibility, Indiana's pioneer tradition included strict gender segregation, racism, and nativism. Amazingly, despite these obstacles, a racial and ethnic mix of clubwomen developed strong female bonds and affected the way "proper" Hoosier women expressed themselves.

A few historians, such as Darlene Clark Hine, have attempted to place clubwomen into the context of the Midwest. Hine and others have also extended their analyses to place clubwomen into Hoosier contexts. For example, in her dissertation, "Ladylike Reformers," Barbara Springer emphasizes the conservative nature of (white native-born) Hoosier clubwomen who found retention of their ladylike identity important when working for change.<sup>57</sup> Springer's thesis is that white Hoosier women faced a tremendous number of challenges as they attempted to engage in social reform in the early twentieth century. They lived in a conservative state in which most citizens and politicians did not want to acknowledge the need for change. Furthermore, Hoosier women had to work within the context of Indiana's impossibly complex and rigid 1851 constitution. In attempting to bring about social reform, however, Springer contends these women "did little to change the popular image of women as wives and mothers. Indeed, they

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<sup>57</sup> Barbara Springer, "Ladylike Reformers: Indiana Women and Progressive Reform, 1900-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1985).

continually stressed these themes themselves.”<sup>58</sup> Springer does not think Hoosier women, for the most part, were interested in reshaping the popular conception of what it meant to be a “lady.” Quite the contrary, they believed “ladydom” brought them influence.<sup>59</sup>

In *When the Truth is Told*, Darlene Clark Hine presents the history of organizational work conducted by black women in Indiana.<sup>60</sup> Hine discusses how black women first gained experience (and courage) through church involvement.<sup>61</sup> Unlike white middle-class women who also gained initial experience in church work, Hine purports the work done in black churches often called for cooperation and support across class lines.<sup>62</sup> Furthermore, the black women in Indiana who first formed clubs combined, from the onset, literary (i.e., self-improvement) work with community service. In addition, like their white counterparts, black women also had to deal with Indiana’s conservatism -- which in their case meant racism. Hine believes the increasing violence committed against black Hoosiers in the early twentieth century caused many black

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 250.

<sup>59</sup> Springer nicely illustrates the conservative context in which Hoosier clubwomen operated. Unlike Springer’s analysis, however, this work will expand beyond the conception that only by throwing off femininity and embracing radical feminism could women be agents of progressive change in society.

<sup>60</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women’s Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1950* (Indianapolis: The National Council of Negro Women, 1981).

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 17-30. For more on the influence of church involvement on black women’s organizational efforts, see Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>62</sup> Hine, *When the Truth is Told*, 26.

clubwomen to be more accommodationist in their views and actions than they might have liked.<sup>63</sup>

In her dissertation, “The Missing Half,” Joyce Alida Moonen recounts the history of the Athenaeum *Damenverein*.<sup>64</sup> She illustrates how the Women’s Auxiliary of the *Turnverein* supported the men of the organization and maintained a strong ethnic community in which to raise their families. Overall, Moonen is interested in how this group of women created an internal culture while primarily remaining loyal to the male organization.<sup>65</sup> In other words, she is interested in how the women not only developed a sense of female consciousness, but also a sense of communal consciousness. Moonen’s emphasis on a combination of communal and female consciousness is a useful concept for the study of ethnic as well as black clubwomen. Combining the importance of female and communal consciousness allows for an analysis that illustrates the importance of how some clubwomen united as women and also as members of a certain social classes or ethnic groups.

The methodological differences among Springer, Hine, and Moonen are also worth mentioning. In interpreting the club work of white women, Springer primarily concentrates on their efforts in the Indiana General Assembly. She takes a “session by session” approach and recounts the legislative measures and tactics white native-born clubwomen used to advance their reform issues. By approaching women’s reform work

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>64</sup> Alida Joyce Moonen, “The Missing Half: The Experience of Women in the Indianapolis Athenaeum Turnverein Women’s Auxiliary, 1876-1919” (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1993).

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 3.

in this manner, Springer places women's political involvement squarely within a male context. She only writes about "traditional" (i.e., white male) aspects of political involvement -- lobbying, legislative measures, and petitions.

Black women, on the other hand, had no access to the General Assembly and therefore could not work within the white male context of political activity. To say they were not political, however, would be a mistake.<sup>66</sup> Hine's methodology consists of studying the minutes, ledgers, and personal papers of black Hoosier clubwomen in order to explore their political actions. Her research reveals that black women worked just as hard to achieve reform measures in their own communities. Of course, community work for black clubwomen often meant raising funds to supply basic needs the white Hoosier community took for granted. Black women's achievements cannot be directly compared to those of white women and vice versa.

A direct equation between the successes of immigrant and native-born women would also be inappropriate. Moonen critiques the accomplishments of the immigrant women in her study based not on their political achievements, but by focusing on their shared heritage and on their ability to hold their (ethnic) community together. Like African Americans, German-American immigrants also lived in an "outsider" community. Unlike African-American Hoosier women, however, white German-American immigrants were not as consistently discriminated against and a direct

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<sup>66</sup> When referring to "politics," this paper generally uses the term in its traditional sense. However, my analysis has benefited greatly from an article by Paula Baker in which she asserts that the definition of politics needs to be expanded "to include any action, formal or informal, taken to affect the course or behavior of government or the community." By doing so, women's roles and importance regarding political change becomes more visible. See Paula Baker, "The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920," *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 620-47 (quotation, 622).

comparison between the development of their respective communities would be an oversimplification.

The methodologies of Springer, Hine, and Moonen differ because the social realities of black, white native-born, and foreign- or immigrant-born women do not allow the use of the same research methods. Comparing the methodologies of these three scholars, and the experiences and activities of their subjects illustrates the complexity involved in comparing different groups of clubwomen. Life experiences and social circumstances created different unique circumstances for each of these groups. These women did not often cross paths in their intellectual or community-oriented endeavors. For example, white native-born and immigrant women did not interact due, in part, to different opinions on issues such as temperance and religion. When women found common ground, as did some groups of black and white women, blacks often had to accept certain “strings” attached to white favors and money. The complexity of comparing black and white women and their community/club work, even when they worked together toward similar goals, stems from the fact these women had such fundamentally different life experiences. As Hine and Springer indicate, this complexity extends to even comparing the scholarship on these two groups of women.

Despite this complexity, the study of clubs and activities of black and white women during the Progressive Era is still worthwhile. These women had radically different life experiences that shaped their attitudes and behaviors. Yet these women must be viewed with an understanding of what it meant to live during this era and in a state where moderation, conservatism, and tradition ruled. The clubwomen in this study worked hard to develop their intellects and to improve the lives of others. They were all

disinclined to engage in overt political activity and each group embraced club work and definitions of “true womanhood” differently. In addition, due in part to elitism, racism, and nativism, many groups of women never worked with each other or with members outside their social circles.

Yet certain similarities can be seen between these three groups of women. As the scholarship demonstrates, clubwomen joined clubs so that they could gather with a group of like-minded women and share their desires to better themselves and their communities. In club work, these women learned not only how to research topics for literary discussions, but also how to organize effective organizations for social change. They all learned of their abilities to take control of their environments and to raise their voices. Although the scholarship on why or how women united differs, the fact remains a sense of solidarity developed between clubwomen within, if not across, racial and ethnic lines. From this sense of solidarity, they did remarkable things given the context of the times in which they lived.



## Chapter 2 – “Learning to Know Themselves”: The Indianapolis Woman’s Club

**“Through organized work, women have acquired a consciousness of strength, an independence of action, and a confidence in their ability to decide for themselves their proper sphere of action. They are learning to know themselves.”**

-- Ida Husted Harper<sup>1</sup>

The oldest (still existing) women’s club in Indianapolis is the Indianapolis Woman’s Club (IWC). Some of Indianapolis’s most prominent (native-born white) women spearheaded this club in 1875 and sustained it through times of marriage, childbirth, war, suffrage debates -- every kind of personal and social change imaginable. Radical at its inception as a woman’s-only club, the IWC is perhaps the most conventional of all the clubs in this study. Gender, class, and racial ideologies intertwined in such a way as to shape an elitist attitude within the IWC that often kept club members from fully engaging in progressive efforts.<sup>2</sup> Despite the reserved nature of the group, the members of the IWC created a club that allowed women to fulfill their personal desires by exploring their intellects outside the confines of the domestic sphere.

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<sup>1</sup> Ida Husted Harper, *The Associated Work of the Women of Indiana* (Indianapolis: William B. Burford, Printer & Binder, 1893), 4.

<sup>2</sup> By “elitist,” I mean that the women fully embraced their privileged standing in society based on their status as *ladies* – that is, as white, middle- to upper-class, Protestant, happy-with-the-status-quo clubwomen.

Although seemingly obsessed with decorum and protocol, IWC clubwomen helped alter age-old gender expectations by identifying with each other as *clubwomen* and by embracing the new (public) roles that being a clubwoman offered.

This chapter explores the Indianapolis Woman's Club's internal club culture, membership, (limited) community involvement, meeting spaces, and calendar of events to illustrate how these clubwomen united around their sex, sense of social class, (upper) middle class values, and race. For instance, as a collective whole IWC clubwomen did not act in ways that challenged traditional gender roles.<sup>3</sup> Yet club minutes and paper topics indicate the women were keenly aware of how gender affected their lives. This gender-understanding added to the depth of commitment the women felt toward each other and their organization. Additionally, membership proceedings and reports indicate the importance social class held for the group. The IWC only accepted new members if they met high standards of respectability and their presence added a sense of dignity to the club. Connected to their sense of social class and values was race. Although the women never directly articulated this fact in their meetings, they most definitely united around their whiteness. Their social class and elite standing in society was connected to their color, as was their own sense of respectability. As members of America's dominant racial group, IWC members probably never thought about what their whiteness meant to their identity, at least not in the same sense as they thought about their gender. While

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<sup>3</sup> Whether deciding to petition the city library on the rights of women to independently hold library cards or on whether to vote "yea" on endorsing suffrage at a General Federation of Women's Clubs convention, the IWC consistently took the more conservative path which did not challenge traditional gender norms. Indianapolis Woman's Club (IWC) Minutes, January 18, 1878, and May 15, 1914, IWC Manuscript Collection, Indiana Historical Society Library, Indianapolis (hereafter, "IHS Library").

being of the “second sex” was quite salient in the minds of IWC members, being white was something they simply took for granted.

Such attitudes on gender, social class, and race led the IWC, as a whole, to act conservatively despite its “radical” beginnings as a woman’s literary club. The social and racial elitism shared by many IWC members reinforced a sense of separation from the other women’s clubs of this study. However, like the other clubs, IWC members learned “to know themselves” by belonging to a woman’s club. Although they did not engage in the level of community work undertaken by the African-American women of the Woman’s Improvement Club or the German-American women of the *Damenverein*, they did open their minds to the possibilities of what women could accomplish by meeting separately from men and by talking about the world around them. By uniting and demanding their right to intellectual betterment, they developed a shared sense of consciousness and challenged the status quo even while outwardly embracing it.

Additionally, prominent fathers and husbands allowed IWC members access to material resources unavailable to the other groups of women in this study. Yet unlike the women in Rochester, New York, studied by Nancy Hewitt, IWC clubwomen’s access to prominent men and their money did not place the club on a trajectory of social activism.<sup>4</sup> Although the Hoosier clubwomen of the IWC shared similar gender and class beliefs with their northeastern sisters, regional and historical differences created a

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<sup>4</sup> See Nancy Hewitt, *Women’s Activism and Social Change: Rochester, New York, 1822-1872* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1984).

stronger sense of caution within their midwestern organization.<sup>5</sup> As historian James Madison writes, “change in Indiana has been evolutionary rather than revolutionary.”<sup>6</sup> The IWC was certainly no exception. The privileged status of many IWC members fostered an appreciation for the status quo that created an atmosphere which did not encourage club ventures into the radical waters of social activism. While a few IWC members embraced opportunities for social activism by also joining more “active” women’s clubs such as the Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Society and the Local Council of Women, the IWC itself remained focused on socially acceptable cultural endeavors.

To understand the origins of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club, one must understand the origins of women’s organizations in general. In the early American Republic, women sometimes worked together in female benevolent societies. Although many of these early organizations did not last long, it is important to note that the concept of women-only organizations was not a phenomenon entirely new to the Victorian/Progressive Era.<sup>7</sup> During the Second Great Awakening in the early 1800s, women felt inspired to do more for their families and sometimes joined Maternal Associations.<sup>8</sup> By the 1830s and 1840s, women’s participation in moral reform,

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<sup>5</sup> It is worth noting that Hoosier women were not the only midwestern women to act conservatively. As Janice C. Steinschneider illustrates in *An Improved Woman: The Wisconsin Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1895-1920* (Brooklyn: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1994), Wisconsin women were rather conservative in their actions, but they too always remained gender conscious in their endeavors.

<sup>6</sup> James H. Madison, *The Indiana Way: A State History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), xiii.

<sup>7</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Sara M. Evans, *Born for Liberty: A History of Women in America* (New York: Free Press Paperbacks, 1997), 74.

temperance, and abolition organizations was not normative, but certainly not aberrant either. The women in such movements claimed they, as guardians of the home, had the right to work for society's betterment. In other words, they had a right to the public sphere -- a radical concept for its time. During the 1870s and 1880s, large numbers of women banded together in something completely new: women's clubs. These clubs often began as literary groups and were considered audacious by most of society because the women who joined simply wanted to better themselves.

The 1868 founding of New York City woman's club, *Sorosis*, sparked the exponential growth of the club movement. Jane Croly, a journalist outraged because she and other female professionals were denied attendance at a dinner for Charles Dickens, founded Sorosis to help professional women expand their intellectual horizons. Sorosis and other early clubs, such as Boston's New England Woman's Club, served as structural models for literary clubs that soon formed around the country.

In 1890 Croly formed the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC), which helped create focus and purpose for many local (white) women's clubs. Originally, the goals of the GFWC were not unlike the goals of the Indianapolis Woman's Club. The GFWC's first constitution read: "[C]lubs applying for membership in the General Federation of Women's Clubs must show that no sectarian or political test is required and that while distinctly humanitarian movements may be recognized, their chief purpose is not philanthropic or technical, but social, literary, artistic or scientific culture."<sup>9</sup> The early GFWC endorsed self-improvement for self-improvement's sake; however, Croly

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<sup>9</sup> Mildred White Wells, *Unity in Diversity: The History of the General Federation of Women's Clubs* (Washington, D.C.: General Federation of Women's Clubs, 1953), 29.

and other eastern leaders soon called for a more proactive national organization devoted to helping local clubs develop skills in community activism.

The IWC did not follow the GFWC's lead. The Indianapolis Woman's Club only engaged in a limited amount of community service work, as IWC members generally liked their club just as it was -- a literary organization and social center. As such, the Indianapolis Woman's Club steadfastly stood by its original 1875 constitution's statement of purpose, which read: "The object of this Association shall be to form an organized center for mental and social culture. To this end the Association shall encourage a liberal interchange [sic] of thought by written essays and discussions . . . thereby seeking to improve all domestic and social relations."<sup>10</sup> A true literary club, the IWC focused the majority of its meetings on topics ranging from modern housekeeping to the women in Shakespeare's plays.

The women enjoyed these non-threatening topics because, as mentioned above, notions of propriety and respectability strongly influenced IWC members. Not surprisingly, early club efforts also focused on calming fears that the IWC was a suffrage organization in disguise. Founding member Martha Nicholson McKay is credited with saying, "Lest our little craft should sink in an uncharted sea, the first programs were designed to quiet fears of the anxious. One of the early papers presented with minute details the advantages of choosing Tuesday, instead of Monday, for wash day."<sup>11</sup>

The women who formed the Indianapolis Woman's Club were, for the most part, the well-educated elite of Indianapolis. Many of the earliest members lived in an area on

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<sup>10</sup> IWC Constitution, February 25, 1875, IHS Library.

<sup>11</sup> Helen McKay Steele, "1875-1885," in *Indianapolis Woman's Club: 1875-1940* (Greenfield, IN: The Old Swimming Hole Press, 1944), 30.

the near-northside of Indianapolis known as “College Corner” (now the “Old Northside”) because of its proximity to North Western Christian University, the forerunner of Butler University. Some of the IWC’s founders, including Martha Nicholson McKay and May Wright Sewall, were members of the “College Corner Club” -- a mixed sex literary group founded by Ovid Butler.<sup>12</sup> Taking inspiration from this group and building on their own desires for intellectual betterment, Laura Giddings Julian, Jane F. Nicholson, Eliza Clarke, H. Kate Martin, May Wright Sewall, Belle Thorpe Manlove, and Martha Nicholson McKay, in whose home the club first met, held the first meeting of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club on February 18, 1875.<sup>13</sup>

Some IWC founding members were less reserved than others. Laura Giddings Julian and her family were active in Indianapolis’s Unitarian Church, while Martha Nicholson McKay and May Wright Sewall were known suffragists.<sup>14</sup> Sewall, one of the best known and progressive women in the IWC, was not only a suffragist, but also a

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<sup>12</sup> Margaret Booth Jameson Papers, “Beginnings of the Propylaeum,” n.d., IHS Library.

At the founding of the IWC, May Wright Sewall was married to Edwin Thompson and, therefore, is referred to as May Wright Thompson in IWC records of this time. Edwin Thompson died of tuberculosis in 1875 and, in 1880, May Wright remarried to Theodore Sewall (who, in 1895, also died of tuberculosis). This paper will refer to May Wright as “May Wright Sewall” or “Sewall” for the sake of consistency.

<sup>13</sup> IWC Minutes, February 18, 1875. The first recorded minutes of the IWC mention the seven women listed above as present at the first meeting. However, club programs and yearbooks cite five additional women as officially recognized founding members. These women were: Katharine L. Dorsey, Henrietta Athon Morrison, Elizabeth Nicholson, Sarah R. Perrine, and Nancy G. Roberts. See IWC Program, *Indianapolis Woman’s Club 100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary*.

<sup>14</sup> Steele, “1875-1885,” 17-18, and IWC Clipping File, Bonnie Britton, “Susan B. Anthony Helped Women Get Vote Right,” *Indianapolis Star*, November 7, 1971.



teacher and peace activist.<sup>15</sup> Sewall demonstrated a keen understanding that most of the incoming clubwomen were not as radical as she. While Sewall certainly made known her own reform minded agendas, club records do not indicate any extreme agitation on her part for the club to become more socially active. Sewall understood that a respect for the conservative stance within the IWC presented the best avenue for the overall success of the club.<sup>16</sup> Sewall illustrates how radical individual members of the IWC did not attempt to change the club in drastic ways.<sup>17</sup>

As respectable women who wished to better themselves while maintaining a sense of decorum, the founding clubwomen of the IWC took the business of running the club quite seriously. They had no desire to appear foolhardy or immature in their efforts to organize and successfully manage their organization. Thus, the women developed sophisticated rules and procedures that guided their meetings and other endeavors. For example, the IWC based membership on nomination and invitation only, and held the business portion of their meetings in private. Blackballing of nominees took place if the

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<sup>15</sup> See Ray Boomhower, *“But I Do Clamor”*: *May Wright Sewall, A Life: 1844-1920* (Zionsville, IN: Guild Press of Indiana, 2001).

<sup>16</sup> Sewall made her opinions known through her paper presentations and suggested club activities, but never pushed the club into discussions or work they did not want to do. Some of her paper and discussion topics included “Organization of Woman’s Work” (a paper on cooperative housekeeping), “Current Customs Viewed Through a Historical Perspective,” and a “Discussion of Living Issues” (a discussion on the peace movement). See IWC Minutes, April 1, 1881, November 2, 1893, and December 6, 1901. Sewall also pushed for inter-club correspondence, supported club federation with the GFWC, and urged the IWC to join the Local Council. See IWC Minutes, June 16, 1892, October 10, 1889, and November 6, 1891.

<sup>17</sup> The first elected president, Eliza Hendricks, is probably more typical of the earliest IWC members. Hendricks, Governor Thomas Hendrick’s wife, ceased attending meetings soon after her election as president. Perhaps she wished to spare her husband the embarrassment of having a wife who associated with known suffragists. IWC Minutes, February 25, 1875, and Steele, 29.



club felt the individual would not be a “harmonious member” who “pleasantly yielded” her wishes to the wishes of the majority.<sup>18</sup> Members followed a highly organized format during all of their meetings. The recording secretary read the previous meeting minutes and the corresponding secretary summarized letters and invitations received from other clubs around the country. The membership committee then reported on nominations and the executive committee discussed business. Finally, appointed members read aloud their papers or led a group discussion on a pre-selected topic. Members strictly followed parliamentary procedures based on Robert’s Rules of Order with the annually elected president or vice president presiding over the meeting.

Although a few radicals gained admittance, the club did its best to avoid controversial matters and a sense of strict propriety guided the women’s meetings. (Business matters occasionally turned to “racy” issues such as the delicacy of clapping after a paper presentation or whether bonnets should be removed during a meeting.<sup>19</sup>) The earliest papers and conversations focused on non-threatening “women’s topics” such as, “To be a Good Housekeeper, is it Needful to Devote One’s Entire Time to the Work?,” “The Physical Organization of Woman,” and “Recommended Housekeeping as the Best Element of Success.”<sup>20</sup> As the women became more secure in their purpose, paper presentations and group discussions concentrating on academic subjects such as

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<sup>18</sup> IWC Minutes, January 19, 1883.

<sup>19</sup> IWC Minutes, February 22, November 1, 1895, and November 20, 1896. The women decided to allow clapping, but the bonnets stayed on!

<sup>20</sup> IWC Minutes, March 11, May 7, 1875, and March 4, 1876.

medieval England, American Revolutionary financing, and the works and life of George Eliot increased.<sup>21</sup>

The clubwomen occasionally discussed current events, but contentious issues such as suffrage and politics were generally discouraged. There were limits, after all, on what a group of proper, middle-class ladies should discuss in public. At the same time, a few members wanted more from the club. In her 1897-98 Executive Committee Report, Eliza Wiley wrote: “The possibilities of the I.W.C. have never been tested to its fullest extent. It has been cautious and conservative . . . [with some members wishing] to cooperate, to organize, to pass resolutions, to send out circulars, in short, to do something up to date.”<sup>22</sup> Frustration certainly existed for some of the clubwomen. For example, the 1894-95 executive committee reported it felt pressure to schedule program topics that would “avoid pain to the conservative members, and . . . give pleasure to the radical members.”<sup>23</sup>

These “radical” members appear to have convinced the club to consider formerly taboo topics like religion, politics, and the “woman question” during the 1894-95 season. The Executive Committee Report for that year indicated great success in this endeavor; however, such boldness appears to have been a one-time occurrence, as these topics were never discussed as official programs again. Regardless, the report indicated the growth of tolerance among members on these issues. In the end, the executive committee simply stated,

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<sup>21</sup> IWC Minutes, October 15, 1875, October 6, 1876, and May 20, 1881.

<sup>22</sup> IWC Executive Committee Report, June 3, 1898.

<sup>23</sup> 1894-95 IWC Executive Committee Report.

We have crushed Ibsen's woman in the dust until there is no virtue left . . . . The New Woman . . . that vehicle for sneers and gibes, that boon to the Grub Street hack, has been discussed with temperance, and lastly we have talked of . . . suffrage, briefly and with bated breath . . . but the words have been spoken . . . .<sup>24</sup>

The last recorded mention of suffrage before the passage of the Nineteenth Amendment came in 1914 when the IWC decided its delegate to the GFWC Biennial Convention should vote against a GFWC endorsement of suffrage.<sup>25</sup> Clearly, the majority of IWC clubwomen wished their club to avoid controversy. By an unwritten rule, the club continues its taboo against the topics of religion and politics to this day.

Although the IWC did not officially support woman's suffrage, voting on all club actions allowed IWC clubwomen to best share their opinions regarding the direction of the club. For many of these women, making their opinions known in any other fashion was too difficult. Getting the majority of clubwomen to publicly speak at club meetings proved a severe problem for club leaders. Mary Woollen, chair of the executive committee for 1893, noted the following results of a postal request for paper presenters and conversation leaders: twenty women asked to be excused for all work, forty-two wished to write papers only, and only two women volunteered to lead conversations with an additional four indicating they would either present a paper or lead a discussion.<sup>26</sup> In her 1896 Executive Committee Report, Lillian Ketcham expressed a

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<sup>24</sup> 1894-95 IWC Executive Committee Report.

<sup>25</sup> IWC Minutes, May 15, 1914. Although the IWC voted against an endorsement of suffrage, the motion did carry at the GFWC's convention that year.

<sup>26</sup> 1893 IWC Executive Committee Report. The following year, 1894, the committee chair, Mrs. Victor Hendricks, boasted "with defensible pride" that "three [women] voluntarily placed themselves upon the alter of sacrifice and bravely declared their willingness to fill the role of leader of conversation . . . . It's a growth of 50%." 1894 IWC Executive Committee Report.

profound sense of disappointment that so many women asked to be excused from club work (40 out of 85 members had asked not to present papers). Even more discouraging, she reported the extreme lengths she and the committee resorted to in attempts to recruit leaders for group discussions: “Whenever again I hear people [she crossed out the word “gentlemen”] joking about they way women like to talk I will just refer them to our experience in the I.W.C.”<sup>27</sup> Committee reports into the early twentieth century contain similar complaints.<sup>28</sup>

While notions of propriety influenced the participatory nature of some of the women, so did their cautious Hoosier backgrounds. The women formed committees to investigate the necessity of any suggested community work. The majority of members were reluctant undertake this work, regardless who supported it, if they were unsure of its benefit or necessity. For example, when an IWC member suggested the club donate money to an industrial school training program in which she personally was involved, the club first established a committee to look into the usefulness of industrial training. Once they decided to help fund the project, the committee also decided which school would receive the money.<sup>29</sup>

At other times, the clubwomen decided against the wisdom of investigations altogether. In 1902 the Indiana Union of Literary Clubs (IULC), a mixed-sex federation

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<sup>27</sup> 1896 IWC Executive Committee Report.

<sup>28</sup> Lillian Ketcham’s Executive Committee Report of 1898 suggested devoting one full year to conversation-only meetings as a way to “develop either ability or self-confidence in our members.” 1898 IWC Executive Committee Report. The 1901-02 Executive Committee Report given by Grace Julian Clarke complained of having to “persuade, cajole or coerce” women into leading conversations. 1902 IWC Executive Committee Report.

<sup>29</sup> IWC Minutes, March 18, 1898.

of literary clubs, asked the IWC to assist its Education Committee in influencing public school administrators regarding literary education. The IWC formed a special committee to investigate the worthiness of the project, but the committee quickly concluded that a full investigation, and thereby any real assistance to the IULC, was unwarranted. The IWC report indicated that “schools, libraries, and the press should improve themselves” and any investigation by literary clubs would be “unintelligent and ineffectual.”<sup>30</sup> The idea of agitating for institutional changes within the school system, even to influence the education of children (a perfectly respectable activity for women), was more than the members of the IWC were willing to do.

In most cases, however, the IWC graciously worked with the IULC. The IWC felt comfortable working with the IULC because its objectives usually centered on cultural, rather than political or socially-minded, activities.<sup>31</sup> Moreover, the IULC was a homegrown Hoosier creation that IWC clubwoman Elizabeth Nicholson helped found in 1890.<sup>32</sup> Pride and loyalty toward the IULC eventually led to difficulties between IWC clubwomen and the leadership of the General Federation of Women’s Clubs. On the surface, these difficulties appear to be little more than a disagreement regarding the male affiliates of the IULC. Underneath the surface arguments, however, were deeper issues regarding control of individual clubs.

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<sup>30</sup> 1902-03 IWC Special Committee Report on the IULC.

<sup>31</sup> Grace Gates Courtney, *History: Indiana Federation of Women’s Clubs* (Fort Wayne, IN: Indiana Federation of Women’s Clubs, 1939), 25.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 31. Interestingly, 1890 is the same year the General Federation of Women’s Clubs formed.

Like many Hoosier (male) politicians who feared reform measures would bring greater government involvement, and thereby less local control, the women of the IWC shared a comparable concern regarding federation with a state organization. IWC members reveled in their accomplishments and derived a sense of independence out of their traditional club work. When the General Federation of Women's Clubs began pressing Indiana's clubwomen to form a GFWC-affiliated state federation, the women of the IWC grew nervous.

Wanting to maintain some control over the situation, in 1897 the IWC initially positioned itself as *the* club in the state to "take the initiative in forming a State Federation of Clubs in harmony with the GFWC."<sup>33</sup> As a charter member of the IULC, the IWC wanted this organization to morph into a GFWC-affiliated state federation. The GFWC would not, however, admit the IULC as anything other than an "associate" organization because of its male member institutions. Due to the GFWC's stance on male members, or rather the perceived audacity of the GFWC's telling the women of Indiana how to federate, opposition within the IWC to form a state federation was strong. The club soon withdrew its name and support from the endeavor.<sup>34</sup>

At the annual meeting of the IULC in 1899, the issue of GFWC federation arose once again. The president of the GFWC, Rebecca Douglas Love, sent a letter asking the IULC to apply for membership since Indiana had yet to form a state federation. At the same time, the IULC was to understand that men could not serve as delegates to any official GFWC function. Martha Nicholson McKay, an IWC clubwoman and IULC

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<sup>33</sup> IWC Minutes, June 4, 1897.

<sup>34</sup> IWC Minutes, December 3, 1897, and Courtney, 127.

delegate, moved to table the request and said, “the GFWC was doing grand work, but it sought to take away the vital individuality of the clubs, merging them all into one, excluding men.”<sup>35</sup>

In their own meetings, IWC members continued to wrestle with what kind of relationship the women of Indiana should have with the GFWC. They feared that by forming the kind of state federation the GFWC wanted, they would lose their independence and have to relinquish their beloved literary work for community service work.<sup>36</sup> Eventually, in 1900, clubwomen elsewhere in the state organized a state federation -- the Indiana State Federation of Women’s Clubs (ISFWC). In 1906, the IULC and ISFWC consolidated and the IWC swallowed its pride and joined the newly created state federation.<sup>37</sup>

An unwillingness to federate under a GFWC umbrella and engage in community service work does not indicate heartlessness on the part of IWC clubwomen. The women of the IWC had developed a profound sense of pride in their accomplishments and they did not wish outside control. Moreover, individual IWC members often involved themselves in benevolent work. They simply enjoyed the continuity the IWC offered as a place to congregate with other women of their status and intellect. The majority made no apologies for steering the club clear of the kind of community work advocated by the GFWC. For example, in 1912 a few members suggested changing the club’s statement of

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<sup>35</sup> Courtney, 79.

<sup>36</sup> IWC Minutes, December 3, 1897, January 19, April 20, October 19, 1900, June 6, 1902, April 3, 1903.

<sup>37</sup> Always concerned about their level of autonomy, the IWC left the ISFWC (and GFWC) in 1927. IWC Collection, ISFWC Resignation Acceptance Letter, May 3, 1927, and Courtney, 30.

purpose to include a broader scope of activities outside of “domestic and social relations.” The club quickly tabled the suggestion.<sup>38</sup> Several years later, Margaret Booth Jameson wrote a club paper that contained part of a conversation she had had with an older IWC member named Annie Ames Spruance. Booth asked Spruance why “the club has [always] been wary of innovations.” Spruance told her “the club should be the one place where women like herself could find some things remaining as they were . . . .”<sup>39</sup>

Although the IWC as a whole did not participate in much community service work, it did not sit idle. From 1891 to 1904, the IWC maintained membership in the Local Council of Women and supported efforts such as petitioning the Committee on Public Safety for a police matron, trying to place a woman on the School Board, and petitioning Congress to impose stiff penalties against polygamy.<sup>40</sup> The IWC also supported or at least encouraged its members to attend lectures by reform-minded individuals such as Jane Addams, Jacob Riis, and Florence Kelley.<sup>41</sup> Some of their most active involvement took place during World War I with donations to the Red Cross, the purchase of Liberty Bonds, and even support of a French and an Armenian orphan.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> IWC Minutes, November 1, 1912.

<sup>39</sup> Margaret Booth Jameson Papers, “The Woman’s Club, 1917-1919,” circa 1975, IHS Library.

<sup>40</sup> IWC Minutes, April 3, 1891, November 3, 1893, January 15, 1901. Founded by May Wright Sewall in 1892, the Local Council of Women was comprised of representatives from various women’s clubs who investigated, researched, and acted upon the civic welfare of Indianapolis. Decisions made by the Local Council were not binding on any of the constituent clubs. In other words, the Local Council never forced the IWC into any of its suggested work.

<sup>41</sup> IWC Minutes, February 2, 1896, February 2, 1900, March 7, 1901.

<sup>42</sup> IWC Minutes, April 20, June 1, 1917, April 15, 1918, June 16, 1919, and March 19, 1920.



While not engaging in as much community work as the other clubwomen in this study, the members of the Indianapolis Woman's Club still managed to exert an indirect influence. Although the IWC did not consider itself a reform-oriented body, the club affiliated with individuals such as Albion Fellows Bacon and gave their "good name" to her work.<sup>43</sup> Lastly, in a club where members included Cornelia Cole Fairbanks, wife of former Vice President Charles Fairbanks, letters regarding the importance of, for example, the conservation of northern Indiana's dunes surely did not sit on a bureaucrat's desk for long.<sup>44</sup> Perhaps more than the other women in this study, IWC members felt the pressure of society's prescribed values and ideals concerning gender and social class, thereby making it harder for them to embrace or work for change. As Barbara Springer reminds the reader in "Ladylike Reformers," Hoosier clubwomen constantly gauged their level of involvement by how respectable it seemed to their middle-class neighbors. Additionally, women interested in social activism had the added "handicap" of working in a conservative state.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> IWC Minutes, October 4, 1912, and January 13, 1913. Evansville native Albion Fellows Bacon became involved in housing reform during the early twentieth century and, because of her efforts, laws regulating housing conditions were enacted in Indiana. See Robert G. Barrows, *Albion Fellows Bacon: Indiana's Municipal Housekeeper* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

<sup>44</sup> IWC Minutes, March 21, 1919.

<sup>45</sup> Barbara Springer, "Ladylike Reformers: Indiana Women and Progressive Reform, 1900-1920" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1985), 5-8, 256. Springer asserts that white Hoosier clubwomen typified the concept of "domestic feminism" by consciously using their "ladylike" traits to exert an influence over their own lives and Hoosier politics. Springer's discussion nicely details the lobbying efforts and petition-writing campaigns of clubwomen while constantly reminding the reader of the importance of "respectability" to middle-class white clubwomen.

As IWC members struggled with their speaking abilities, debated whether to join a state federation, and cautiously engaged in community activism, they maintained a strong sense of loyalty to each other. Club secrecy remained paramount and the women were instructed not to talk about each other or club business outside of club meetings.<sup>46</sup> Secrecy was a way for the women to maintain an aura of respectability and privacy regarding their affairs. Of course, it is doubtful all the members got along, especially since some wanted the club to engage in more community work and others did not, but the records do not reveal overt tensions. Personal papers of some of the IWC clubwomen – particularly IWC founders Martha Nicholson McKay and May Wright Sewell – reveal a different story, however.

Martha Nicholson McKay's personal correspondence during the summer and fall of 1878 documents that conflicts between club members did exist. McKay, a member of the executive committee of the Indiana branch of the American Woman's Suffrage Association (AWSA), received a letter from Lucy Stone indicating that the AWSA would possibly like to hold its annual conference in Indianapolis. McKay wrote May Wright Sewall, who was a member of the Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Society, with the exciting news. Sewall offered to help with any needed arrangements. Next, without McKay's knowledge, Sewall began writing Stone to solidify the AWSA's commitment. A confused Stone thought Sewall was writing on behalf of McKay and that the Indiana branch of the AWSA and the Indianapolis Equal Suffrage Society were the same organization. After several letters between McKay and Stone, Stone finally understood her mistake and wrote Sewall indicating that she wished for McKay and her organization

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<sup>46</sup> IWC Minutes, January 19, 1893, and February 5, 1904.

to handle the potential conference and not Sewall. Additional correspondence between McKay and other socially active women indicates that McKay believed Sewall often spoke harshly of her because of the matter. Despite the ill feelings between the women, IWC records during 1878 and beyond do not reflect any problems between McKay and Sewall.<sup>47</sup>

The clubwomen left controversies and hard feelings out of their records either because they desired to shape a positive version of their history or because they genuinely kept personal matters out of club meetings. Considering that the image of the woman reflected on the image of the group, and vice versa, it is not a stretch to believe they ignored personal conflicts during club meetings. In instances such as these, a sense of feminine propriety served them well by not allowing the club to be torn apart by the differences of a few. Maintaining a sense of decorum is what allowed IWC members to share in a sense of solidarity and to busy themselves with the self-improvement work they found so important.

The metaphorical space created by the clubwomen further enhanced a sense of gender and class solidarity. For the first several years of the club's existence, the women held meetings at each other's homes, churches, and even a hotel parlor room. Before they had a permanent "home," the women successfully met in these venues to share their opinions on literary matters and to improve their intellects. No matter where the women met, they encouraged each other to speak and to be proud of their abilities. Their struggles to overcome shyness and to continually find a place to gather helped further a

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<sup>47</sup> Martha Nicholson McKay to Lucy Stone, July 31, August 15, September 10, 23, and 29, October 4, 7, and 11, 1878; McKay to May Wright Sewall, August 4, 1878; McKay to Elizabeth Nicholson, November 23, 1879; McKay to Mary Livermore, January 9, 1880, Theodore Steele Papers, IHS Library.

sense of female consciousness, that is, the belief that by uniting as women they could tackle any challenge. This sense of mutual support is what gave them the strength to support the building of their own clubhouse: the Propylaeum.

The Propylaeum, meaning “gateway to culture” in Greek, was the idea of May Wright Sewall and was not the sole venture of the IWC. However, IWC members played a pivotal role in the funding, building, and running of the Propylaeum. Sewall first announced her idea of a woman-built, owned, and operated meeting facility during a Room Committee meeting of the IWC on April 30, 1888.<sup>48</sup> Sewall envisioned a cultural and social center for all (white) Indianapolis clubwomen and set about the formation of a stock company to raise money for the venture. The stock company’s object “would be to erect, own, and administer a building especially for club use, a club home. It’s [sic] object being public spirit, quite as much as commercial self-support.”<sup>49</sup> Many of Indianapolis’s most prominent white women joined the stock company for \$25 a share and on June 6, 1888, with capital of \$15,000, the company incorporated. The company’s Articles of Incorporation decreed that stock could “be acquired, purchased and held only by women.”<sup>50</sup>

The site of the original Propylaeum (the south side of North Street, between Meridian and Pennsylvania streets) was purchased in November, 1888, for \$5,500.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Caroline Dunn, *A History of the Indianapolis Propylaeum: 1888-1938* (Indianapolis: privately printed, 1938), 4.

<sup>49</sup> Margaret Booth Jameson Papers, “Beginnings of the Propylaeum,” n.d., IHS Library.

<sup>50</sup> Dunn, *A History of the Indianapolis Propylaeum*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

Within the next two years, the woman-owned stock company paid off the property, hired the architects Scherrer and Moore, and laid the cornerstone on May 8, 1890. In February, 1891, after sixteen nomadic years, the IWC met for the first time at the Propylaeum and have met there ever since.<sup>52</sup> The original Romanesque revival structure stood on this location until its demolition in 1922. This loss did not crush the spirit of the clubwomen, who purchased another home on the near north side of downtown Indianapolis and began meeting there in 1923.<sup>53</sup>

Although other organizations shared space at the Propylaeum, it became a second home to the IWC and the women took great pride in meeting there. The creation of their own space meant a great deal to these women as it illustrated their intelligence and determination to become more active agents in their own lives. Sewall's dream pushed the limits of acceptable female behavior and demonstrated that women have business acumen. Even the most conservative and traditionally minded clubwomen could not deny the profound sense of accomplishment they felt after undertaking such a mammoth project.<sup>54</sup>

IWC members also advanced a strong sense of accomplishment and consciousness through a calendar of events that the women could always count on and look forward to enjoying. Club meetings on the first and third Friday of the month, the

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<sup>52</sup> IWC Minutes, February 6, 1891.

<sup>53</sup> The original Propylaeum was demolished as part of the creation of the Indiana War Memorial complex. The current Propylaeum stands at 1410 N. Delaware Street.

<sup>54</sup> A newspaper article covering the opening ceremony of the original Propylaeum in 1891 stated, "It was a point of pride with them [the female shareholders and clubwomen] to show what women could do . . . ." IWC Clipping File, "Ecce Femina," paper name not given, 1891.

yearly spring elections, and the opening “President’s Day” of the new social year (October –June) gave shape to the workings of the club and provided consistency and internal traditions. The club calendar also allowed IWC members to enjoy the privileges of their social and economic status. Treasurer and room committee reports often indicate the extensive purchases made throughout the year to make annual events even more elegant than their predecessors.<sup>55</sup> IWC clubwomen had the material resources to make their club an elite enclave needing no alteration or apology. Literary interests and gender certainly united these women, but their middle- and upper-class ranks also influenced their activities and sense of consciousness as a group.

Their sense of female consciousness grew to include wholehearted support of other (white) women’s clubs around the country. In 1882, IWC members wrote the most influential of women’s clubs, Sorosis of New York, suggesting a “methodical and complete system of inter-communication” between all (white) women’s clubs to foster the development of literary clubs around the nation.<sup>56</sup> Sorosis followed this suggestion and letter writing between clubs increased. Although the women of the IWC never embraced radical political causes, their actions to encourage communication between clubs helped to create a support system between clubs.

The women of IWC furthered the “imagined community” Anne Ruggles Gere wrote about in *Intimate Matters* by encouraging women across the country to share with each other their own club experiences and accomplishments. When clubs from Evansville, Indiana, to Madison, Wisconsin, to Portland, Oregon, wrote and asked for

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<sup>55</sup> See IWC Treasurer Reports from 1882-89, 1891-1901, 1915-20, and Room Committee Reports from 1892, 1894-95, 1897-98, 1900-01, 1916, and 1920.

<sup>56</sup> IWC Minutes, June 16, 1882.

samples of the club constitution or donations to establish a library or clubhouse, the women of the IWC always assisted their fellow clubwomen.<sup>57</sup> They helped sustain a network of support that fostered a sense of kinship and unity between women of similar social and class backgrounds. Communicating with these clubs, IWC members learned of activist activities in other cities. Even if the IWC did not engage in these enterprises, communication between clubs allowed more radical IWC members the opportunity to hear about the deeds of others and to be inspired to do more.

In summary, a sense of conservatism shaped the existence of the Indianapolis Woman's Club. The clubwomen of the IWC took pride in their womanhood and their ability to better themselves while assisting other clubwomen. Furthermore, they understood that their identities were intimately linked with their sex and their roles as women. They acted with caution regarding their ladylike status and what society considered proper behavior. More than the other clubs in this study, the IWC members found solidarity in a combination of gender, class, and, implicitly, their race. They united around their (upper) middle-class status and understood that their social standing was connected not only to money but also to ideals concerning the respectability of their gender.

As Sarah Deutsch points out in "Learning to Talk More Like a Man," the more conservative of America's women's organizations were the ones most likely to successfully maintain autonomy and perpetuate a "woman's culture."<sup>58</sup> Annie Ames

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<sup>57</sup> IWC Minutes, April 16, April 28, 1886, and April 15, 1904.

<sup>58</sup> Sarah Deutsch, "Learning to Talk More Like a Man: Boston Women's Class-Bridging Organizations, 1870-1940," *American Historical Review* 97 (April 1992): 403.



Spruance acknowledged as much in a speech she gave on the IWC's tenth anniversary: "We discussed nearly everything except politics and religion and perhaps our wisdom in leaving those two subjects unhandled accounts for our being alive and so prosperous tonight."<sup>59</sup> By avoiding controversial topics, the IWC created a safe space for women to grow as individuals and to choose their own paths.

Ironically, the conservatism that allowed the emergence of a "woman's culture," or sense of female consciousness, also allowed the more independent minded to tackle society's problems on their own. The IWC provided a safe haven for its more conservative members who wished only to socialize and discuss literary topics. But the club also provided a training ground for those women who wished to bolster their speaking and reasoning abilities so that they could venture into the world and engage in socially active causes. Membership in the club fostered a sense of intelligence and self-confidence in the clubwomen. Although the majority of IWC clubwomen could never be classified as "radicals," membership allowed some of the more adventurous women to develop their abilities to do more on their own. Whether individual members of the IWC became socially active or not, the IWC helped women learn to know themselves.

In her outgoing 1920-21 Executive Committee Report, Annie Ames Spruance wrote, "The Literary Club has few friends in these altruistic days but we express our belief that the work being done here goes toward justifying its continued existence."<sup>60</sup> Despite their conservatism, by undertaking literary work, assisting other clubs, performing some community work, and sponsoring the Propylaeum, the women of the

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<sup>59</sup> IWC, *Indianapolis Woman's Club*, 41.

<sup>60</sup> 1920 IWC Executive Committee Report.



IWC expanded on their roles as women and justified club's existence. They created an environment where they could be intelligent and influential individuals who had roles other than wives, mothers, or daughters. Without intending to, they helped change what was deemed acceptable behavior for women. Ultimately, they improved their lives and the lives of future generations by focusing on their own personal desires and by ignoring at least one "true womanhood ideal" -- that of remaining in the home in order to be seen as "proper."

### Chapter 3 – “Her Place in the Sun”: The Woman’s Improvement Club

**“It is fitting at this time that the Negro woman should take her part in the Century of Progress and prove to the world that she, too, is finding her place in the sun.”**

-- Elizabeth Lindsay Davis<sup>1</sup>

African-American women uniting for the benefit of their communities was nothing new in American history. Anne Firor Scott argues in *Natural Allies* that the historical roots of *all* self-improvement/literary clubs lie in the clubs established by free black women in the eastern United States before the Civil War. Black women who united in support of the black community during times of abolition agitation and slavery, Scott insists, laid the foundation for early benevolent clubs, which later evolved into self-improvement clubs.<sup>2</sup> Not surprisingly, like thousands of other African-American women across this country, when African-American women in Indianapolis formed their own literary club, they combined a wish to better themselves with the desire to improve the lives of other black citizens. As these women gathered together to better their worlds, their dignity shone bright and their sense of purpose never wavered.

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<sup>1</sup> Elizabeth Lindsay Davis, *Lifting as They Climb: An Historical Record of the National Association of Colored Women* (Washington, D.C.: National Association of Colored Women, 1933; reprint, New York: G.K. Hall & Company, 1996), 7.

<sup>2</sup> Anne Firor Scott, *Natural Allies: Women’s Associations in American History* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), 112.

Historians have noted how African-American women linked charitable work within their communities with club activities.<sup>3</sup> Since slavery, black women had historically understood their roles as women to mean they were responsible for creating a sense of community in an otherwise rootless environment. Whenever black women had the opportunity, they brought whatever aid they could into their communities. This tradition did not end with slavery and, once freed, black women continued to not only support themselves and their own families, but also other African Americans. The women of the Indianapolis-based Woman's Improvement Club (WIC) combined this tradition of activism with middle-class values not only to help others, especially those with tuberculosis, but also to achieve a sense of personal enrichment while improving their own images as "ladies."

WIC clubwomen melded goals of racial advancement with their desires for personal enrichment and improved image because, as Deborah Gray White argues in "The Cost of Club Work, the Price of Black Feminism," race, gender, and class issues were inseparable to black women.<sup>4</sup> According to White, African American clubwomen believed their image directly linked to perceptions about the whole race.<sup>5</sup> Negative

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<sup>3</sup> See Darlene Clark Hine, "Lifting the Veil, Shattering the Silence: Black Women's History in Slavery and Freedom," in *The State of Afro-American History: Past, Present, and Future*, ed. Darlene Clark Hine (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1986), 223-49; Anne Firor Scott, "Most Invisible of All: Black Women's Voluntary Associations," *Journal of Southern History* 56 (Feb. 1990): 3-22; and Stephanie Shaw, "Black Club Women and the Creation of the National Association of Colored Women," *Journal of Women's History* 3 (Fall 1991): 10-25.

<sup>4</sup> Deborah Gray White, "The Cost of Club Work, the Price of Black Feminism," in *Visible Women: New Essays in American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 249-50.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

stereotypes regarding the wantonness of black women, therefore, reflected poorly on all African Americans. While working to improve their communities, African-American clubwomen challenged stereotypes that cast all black women as immoral and the entire race as inferior to whites. As Gray stresses, African-American clubwomen saw “what they did for women they did for the race, what they did for the race they did for all classes of the race, and when they worked for all classes they worked for black women and black men.”<sup>6</sup>

Of course, confronting issues of race, gender, and class simultaneously was difficult to do and black clubwomen often found it impossible to address these issues equally at all times.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, many black men did not appreciate being told the future of the race rested on the shoulders of women. As black women gained status through their educational and community endeavors, some black men began to develop the (white) mindset that women were inferior and men should shape the future of “race work.”<sup>8</sup> Although organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and Urban League owed many of their early successes to the efforts of dedicated female volunteers, they evolved as essentially male organizations that took over the work for racial advancement. This is perhaps why, out of all the clubs in this study, the WIC is the only one no longer in existence.<sup>9</sup> While members of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club and *Damenverein* each dealt with their own unique

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>8</sup> Linda M. Perkins, “The Impact of the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ on the Education of Black Women,” *Journal of Social Issues* 39 (1983): 24.

<sup>9</sup> The WIC disbanded in 1989 after years of relative inactivity.

circumstances and challenges, they did not experience the dual burden of sexism and racism.<sup>10</sup> Nor did their “feminism” pit them against the men in their lives who were working towards the same kind of goals.<sup>11</sup>

Regardless, at its zenith of activity, the women of the WIC formed a club in which they developed strong bonds with each other, their community, and other African-American clubwomen. A sense of female consciousness informed by race and social status allowed WIC clubwomen to draw on each other and their surrounding community to improve the lives of many Indianapolis blacks, especially those afflicted with tuberculosis. The following quotation, which appeared in the *Indianapolis Recorder*, a local African-American newspaper, describes the efforts of these and other black clubwomen:

Club life has found in the Afro-American woman a hearty response. Oppression has made her sympathetic and charitable, . . . she is fully imbued with the fact that no race can rise higher than its women, and to this end she is bending all her energy toward removing the barriers which are everywhere in evidence against her.<sup>12</sup>

Although WIC clubwomen willingly helped those less fortunate than themselves, as the years passed the club became increasingly selective regarding who could join. WIC clubwomen wished to be viewed as ladies and tighter admission requirements

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<sup>10</sup> *Damenverein* clubwomen confronted the ugly specter of nativism during World War I; however, their struggles with ethnic discrimination did not remain a constant force in their lives as it did (and does) with African American women. The history of the German community in Indianapolis, and elsewhere, is not one of persistent discrimination. As with the members of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club, *Damenverein* members had certain advantages due to their whiteness.

<sup>11</sup> White, “The Cost of Club Work,” 264.

<sup>12</sup> “Women as Standard for Races,” *Indianapolis Recorder*, 11 September 1909.

helped them form a club just as exclusive in its own way as the (white) Indianapolis Woman's Club. In fact, the amazing assortment of African-American women who initiated and supported the Woman's Improvement Club shared many similarities with the Indianapolis Woman's Club. Both organizations held literary circles twice a month, conducted elections, nominated and debated about new members, and followed Robert's Rules of Order. A predictable club calendar, with the general club season lasting from September until July, gave both sets of women something to look forward to and plan for each year. Yet, no matter how "elite" the WIC became, a fundamental difference existed between these two groups. For the African-American women of the WIC, self-improvement consistently went hand-in-hand with community improvement. Moreover, as with many black women's organizations, a sense of "us" and "them" did not exist as strongly as it did between white clubwomen and the individuals they assisted. While "they" might not have gained membership into the WIC, the clubwomen still understood that race linked all their futures.

One cannot doubt the devotion of WIC clubwomen regarding their sense of community service. They believed firmly in the importance of education and in the notion of "giving back" to the community. At the same time, WIC clubwomen demonstrated a good deal of caution in many of their actions. Earline Rae Ferguson points out that black Hoosiers worked in a "conservative climate, both in and outside their communities." The conservatism exercised by black Hoosiers fit with white Hoosier conservatism in that past traditions were cherished and agitating for immediate

change in the status quo was viewed as controversial and risky.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, like the Indianapolis Woman's Club, the Woman's Improvement Club allowed its female members the opportunity to demonstrate their public abilities, but was not a (modern) feminist organization. Neither group of clubwomen agitated for changes in their domestic situations, but rather tried to gain influence through their "ladylike" behaviors and attitudes. For reasons such as these, the Woman's Improvement Club appeared more "Washingtonian" (i.e., accommodationist) than DuBoisian.<sup>14</sup> Regardless, by uniting around their race and sex, WIC clubwomen forever changed the status of healthcare for the black citizens of Indianapolis and challenged the notion of what constituted a true "lady."

Before exploring the history of the Woman's Improvement Club in detail, a caveat is necessary regarding the paucity of WIC records. As other historians have noted, primary sources related to African-American women's clubs are often difficult to obtain.<sup>15</sup> While black clubwomen usually followed the same kind of parliamentary

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<sup>13</sup> Earline Rae Ferguson, "A Community Affair: African-American Women's Club Work in Indianapolis, 1879-1917" (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1997), 17 and 41.

<sup>14</sup> Anne Meis Knupfer argues in *Toward a Tenderer Humanity and a Nobler Womanhood: African American Women's Clubs in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 11, that many black clubwomen kept up the appearance of working within a "Washingtonian" organization so that they could get more out of whites, but as middle-class, educated citizens, they personally felt connected to DuBois's notion of the "Talented Tenth."

<sup>15</sup> See Lynda F. Dickson, "Toward a Broader Angle of Vision in Uncovering Women's History: Black Women's Clubs Revisited," *Frontiers* 9 (1987): 62-63; Darlene Clark Hine et al., *Black Women in the Middle West Project: A Comprehensive Resource Guide, Illinois and Indiana* (Indianapolis: No publisher given, 1986), 1-14; Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds Its Past: Placing Women in History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1979), 68.

procedures as their white counterparts, they did not necessarily preserve their club records with the same kind of fastidiousness. As Darlene Clark Hine writes, “[b]lack women had a strong but muted sense of their own history as well as an acute but unfocused interest in making their history known to the general public.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, while black women might have had an appreciation for their own history, the preservation of that history for the prying eyes of others was not necessarily something they devoted time towards.

Additionally, Mary E. Frederickson contends in “‘Each One is Dependent on the Other,’” that African-American clubwomen carefully shaped their words in ways that transformed their concerns into a format white women could find acceptable.<sup>17</sup> Mindful of the consequences of their words, black clubwomen perfected the art of indirect speaking and dissemblance both in their writings and spoken meetings.<sup>18</sup> Black clubwomen, therefore, tended to use guarded comments in their records and often did not keep (or make available) those records for posterity.

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<sup>16</sup> Hine, *Black Women in the Middle West*, 1.

<sup>17</sup> Mary E. Frederickson “‘Each One is Dependent on the Other’: Southern Churchwomen, Racial Reform, and the Process of Transformation, 1880-1940,” in *Visible Women: New Essays in American Activism*, ed. Nancy A. Hewitt and Suzanne Lebsock (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993), 297.

<sup>18</sup> In “Rape and the Inner Lives of Black Women: Thoughts on the Culture of Dissemblance,” in *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), Darlene Clark Hine suggests that black women “created the appearance of openness and disclosure but actually shielded the truth of their inner lives . . . from their oppressors.” Protecting themselves through invisibility, these women developed powerful self-images that helped garner the strength “to support churches, found institutions, and engage in social service activities,” 37, 43.



This chapter, therefore, utilizes fewer quotations and first person impressions than the previous chapter.<sup>19</sup> Rather than viewing the silences in the primary sources of the WIC as a weakness, I argue these silences can potentially reveal a great deal about the inner workings of the Woman's Improvement Club. For example, while the (white) Indianapolis Woman's Club reported *everything* in their minutes – passages of discussions, lines from papers, sections of committee presentations; everything in tedious detail – the Woman's Improvement Club more accurately followed Robert's Rules of Order which declares “the duty of the secretary . . . is mainly to record what is ‘done’ by the assembly, and not what is said by its members.” By strictly following parliamentary procedure, WIC clubwomen reinforced their image as refined ladies and shaped an official history for white interlopers to scrutinize. The lack of surviving WIC sources might actually demonstrate a powerful tactic used by these black clubwomen to control their organization outside the full view of (white) society.

Woman's Improvement Club members might have purposefully “lost” their records or, always active and busy in their neighborhoods, perhaps these women did not have the time to focus on saving their records for posterity. More immediate challenges existed and the women prioritized accordingly. Additionally, whatever funds these clubwomen raised usually went right back into the community. Conceivably, money would not have been spent on the purchase of office supplies to maintain a mountain of records (as was done in the Indianapolis Woman's Club).

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<sup>19</sup> The Woman's Improvement Club (WIC) officially existed from 1903 to 1989. Only minute books from 1909-11 and 1916-18 are in the WIC Manuscript Collection at the Indiana Historical Society. A few additional reports, receipts, newspaper clippings, and letters also exist.

Using a mixture of primary and secondary sources, this chapter looks at the internal club culture, individual members, and community involvement of the WIC. Furthermore, Chapter 3 explores how gender, class (or social status), and race combined to influence the actions of WIC members. While these factors influenced the white clubwomen of the Indianapolis Woman's Club (and, in Chapter 4, the *Damenverein*), they played out quite differently in the lives of WIC clubwomen. For example, economic class was an important factor on who gained admittance to the WIC, especially in its later years, but a sense of status (social class) based on education and community involvement was equally important. As Willard B. Gatewood argues in *Aristocrats of Color*, African Americans in the Midwest believed being "self-made" was more important than the economic standing or lineage of one's family. Therefore, the black elite in the Midwest, while still exclusive, was somewhat more flexible regarding who gained admittance into top social circles than their black contemporaries in the Northeast (or their local white counterparts).<sup>20</sup>

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In 1890 the General Federation of Women's Clubs (GFWC) formed as a white woman's umbrella organization; black women's clubs were not invited to join and black members of otherwise "white" clubs were not truly welcome at national meetings.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Willard B. Gatewood, *Aristocrats of Color: The Black Elite, 1880-1920* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 115-138.

<sup>21</sup> In 1900, Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a representative of both the black Woman's Era Club (Boston) and the white New England Federation of Women's Clubs was almost barred from the GFWC's biannual convention. Delegates of the GFWC decided to accept Ruffin's credentials from the New England Federation, but not from the Woman's Era Club. At the same convention, Mary Church Terrell, president of the National Association of Colored Women, was denied the courtesy of issuing official greetings to the GFWC on behalf of the NACW for fear of offending (white) southern

Without a national organization, black women's clubs worked independently of each other until 1896. A year earlier, James W. Jacks, the president of the Missouri Press Association, wrote a letter to a white anti-lynching activist in which he stated the black race lacked all sense of morality and black women were no better than prostitutes. The activist to whom he sent the letter gave it to Josephine St. Pierre Ruffin, a prominent female leader in the black community and a member of the Boston Woman's Era Club.

Ruffin soon began working toward the formation of a national organization. She coordinated the First National Conference of Colored Women in Boston in 1895. That same year, Margaret Murray Washington (Booker T. Washington's wife) became the president of the newly created National Federation of Afro-American Women. A few years earlier in 1893, Mary Church Terrell had begun the process of trying to unite all African American clubwomen under the umbrella of the National League of Colored Women. After minor power struggles, these groups all came together in 1896 as the National Association of Colored Women (NACW).<sup>22</sup> Unlike white clubwomen, black clubwomen did not need a national organization to inspire them into community action. The NACW simply helped focus the work that was already being done. Perhaps most importantly, the NACW formed a sense of national community through common club efforts.<sup>23</sup>

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clubwomen. See Beverly W. Jones, "Mary Church Terrell and the National Association of Colored Women, 1896 to 1901," *Journal of Negro History* 67 (Spring 1982): 23-24.

<sup>22</sup> See *Ibid.*, 21-23; Gerda Lerner, "Early Community Work of Black Club Women," *Journal of Negro History* 59 (April 1974): 161-62; and Wilson Jeremiah Moses, "Domestic Feminism, Conservatism, Sex Roles, and Black Women's Clubs, 1893-1896," *Journal of Social and Behavioral Sciences* 24 (Fall 1987): 171-75, for the particulars on the formation of the NACW.

<sup>23</sup> Shaw, "Black Club Women," 17.

Energized by the progress of the National Association of Colored Women, Lillian Thomas Fox, a prominent journalist in the Indianapolis African-American community, left the 1903 Detroit NACW convention with the determination to form a literary club for black women in Indianapolis. Many African-American clubs already existed in Indianapolis, but these clubs were primarily philanthropic, as opposed to self-improvement, clubs. For example, the Sisters of Charity, founded in 1874, constituted a network of clubs across the state that provided healthcare for poor African Americans.<sup>24</sup> The Alpha Home (a home for elderly and indigent African Americans) and the Flanner Guild (a white-owned, but black-run settlement house) were both founded in the late 1800s and constituted organizations in which black women (and men) worked to better their communities. Additionally, a host of female-led activities took place in most African-American churches in the city.<sup>25</sup> Each of these organizations gave black women the opportunity to help their communities, but did not directly focus on the individual needs of their female members. Therefore, when she returned to Indiana, Fox initiated the Woman's Improvement Club, which initially focused on the intellectual needs of its members. Within two years, however, the club found itself enmeshed in community service work.

A year after the WIC's formation, Fox spearheaded the creation of the Indiana State Federation of Colored Women's Clubs (ISFCWC). In the words of historian Erlene

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<sup>24</sup> See Earline Rae Ferguson, "Sisterhood and Community: The Sisters of Charity and African-American Women's Health Care in Indianapolis, 1876-1920," in *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 158-77, for a detailed history of the Sisters of Charity.

<sup>25</sup> Darlene Clark Hine, *When the Truth is Told: A History of Black Women's Culture and Community in Indiana, 1875-1950* (Indianapolis: National Council of Negro Women, 1981), 23-28.

Stetson, the general aims of the Federation “were to show the world what black women had accomplished under the most adverse circumstances; to dedicate their lives to serving the less fortunate . . . and to give strength to each other through their mutual cooperation.”<sup>26</sup> Like the Indianapolis Woman’s Club, WIC members sometimes questioned whether federation was worthwhile, but affiliated with the ISFCWC anyway.<sup>27</sup> Endorsing Federation goals and with a membership that included some of the city’s most formidable black female leaders, the original purpose of the WIC -- to bring about “the mutual improvement of its members in literature” -- soon changed.<sup>28</sup>

The women who created the WIC in 1903 came from a variety of backgrounds and interests. Lillian Thomas Fox, for instance, began her journalism career in Chicago and then started reporting for the African-American newspaper, the *Freeman*, when she moved to Indianapolis in the 1880s. In 1900, Fox became the first black reporter assigned to the *Indianapolis News* (one of the most prominent newspapers in the city).<sup>29</sup> Another member, Ida Webb Bryant, came from a socially active and long-time Indianapolis family. Her mother, Huldah Bates Webb, served as president and treasurer of the Alpha Home. Bryant herself continued an active involvement with the Alpha Home after she became involved with the WIC.

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<sup>26</sup> Erlene Stetson, “Black Feminism in Indiana, 1893-1933,” *Phylon* XLIV (December 1983): 295.

<sup>27</sup> WIC Minutes, March 17, 1910, May 4, 1911, and September 20, 1917. Most talks concerning the state federation happened within the context of discussing taxes and dues.

<sup>28</sup> WIC Constitution, undated copy in the 1909-11 Minute Book.

<sup>29</sup> *Indianapolis Recorder*, August 12, 1905.

Multiple club or community service affiliations were common among WIC clubwomen. For example, schoolteacher Beulah Wright Porter joined not only the WIC, but also the Sisters of Charity, Flanner Guild, Bethel A.M.E. Church Ladies Alliance, the Woman's Club, and the local chapter of the NAACP among other clubs! Somehow, Porter also managed to earn a medical degree (with honors) from the Indiana Medical College in 1896. Due to poor business, Porter gave up medicine in 1901, returned to teaching, and became the principal of P.S. 40 in 1905. A Wilberforce graduate, Rose Hummons never went to medical school like Porter, but she proudly served on the Ladies Auxiliary of the Aesculapian Society -- an African-American medical society -- in support of her husband, Dr. Henry L. Hummons.<sup>30</sup> Rose Hummons also busied herself with the Ladies Missionary Society, Phyllis Wheatley YWCA, and the Medical, Dental, and Pharmaceutical Guild.<sup>31</sup> Another WIC member, schoolteacher Ada Harris, served as an officer in the Phyllis Wheatley Club, the Murphy Temperance League, and the Christian Endeavor Society of Bethel A.M.E. Church. Additionally, Harris built her own night school for black adults and owned a laundry and cooperative grocery. Clearly proud of her African-American roots, Harris reportedly served chitlins and greens whenever clubwomen met at her home.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Henry Lytle Hummons Collection, Clipping File, Rose Hummons obituary, *Indianapolis News*, March 20, 1946, IHS Library.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, *Indianapolis Recorder*, n.d.

<sup>32</sup> For more details on WIC clubwomen, see Ida Webb Bryant, *Glimpses of the Negro in Indianapolis, 1863-1963* (Indianapolis: privately printed, 1963), 10-22, 53-57; Ferguson, "A Community Affair," 115-57; Earline Rae Ferguson, "The Woman's Improvement Club of Indianapolis: Black Women Pioneers in Tuberculosis Work, 1903-1938," *Indiana Magazine of History* 84 (September 1988): 237-61; and Hine, *When the Truth is Told*, 31-45.

While club membership was eventually comprised of elites in the African-American community, the earliest members did not all have the same professional standing or education as these later clubwomen. The Woman's Improvement Club began as an organization that stressed self-improvement and the sharing of personal knowledge. Some of the earliest members worked in laundries and kitchens and saw the WIC as a means to improve their intellects so that they could ensure better lives for their daughters and nieces.<sup>33</sup> As the club grew, it limited itself to twenty active members, most of whom were the progeny of earlier members.<sup>34</sup> These later WIC members tended to have advanced educations and professional careers. With time, the WIC became an elite club; its origins, however, were more humble than the Indianapolis Woman's Club and unlike the IWC, the African-American clubwomen of the WIC enthusiastically embraced community service work on top of their literary endeavors.

The women involved in the WIC were dynamic individuals with varied interests and strong determination. In addition, they all shared the common goal of "social and cultural uplift and service to the less fortunate."<sup>35</sup> In 1905, Ida Webb Bryant proposed that the WIC begin addressing the needs of black tuberculosis patients in the city.<sup>36</sup> From then on, the Woman's Improvement Club primarily poured its efforts into fighting

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<sup>33</sup> Ferguson, "Community Affair," 116.

<sup>34</sup> WIC Constitution, undated copy in 1909-11 Minute Book.

<sup>35</sup> Emma Lou Thornbrough, "The History of Black Women in Indiana," in *Indiana's African-American Heritage: Essays from Black History News & Notes*, ed. Wilma L. Gibbs (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1993), 74.

<sup>36</sup> (Undated) Speech notes on the history of the WIC, c. 1963.



tuberculosis -- a disease that ravaged the black community in Indianapolis during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

America faced challenges such as urbanization and overcrowded and unsanitary living conditions in the early 1900s. Even Indiana, with its traditional notions of rural life, could not escape this fact in spite of efforts to ignore reality. Fearful of government regulations, the state failed to inaugurate a State Board of Health until November of 1881. A sometimes toothless entity, the State Board reacted slowly to the health needs of Hoosiers. Not until 1900, when an estimated 5,000 Hoosiers a year died of tuberculosis, did the Indiana State Board of Health acknowledged tuberculosis as a serious public health threat. The Board reacted by issuing several thousand informational pamphlets explaining the spread of the disease.<sup>37</sup>

Groups such as the Flower Mission Society, a white women's charity organization, opened a 25-bed unit for tuberculosis patients in 1903. City Hospital opened a free clinic in 1907, and in 1912 private citizens James W. Lilly, Dr. Theodore Potter, and Dr. Alfred Henry founded the Marion County Society for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis. Eventually, in 1917, Marion County funded Sunnyside Sanatorium for tuberculosis patients. At their inception, none of these measures benefited the black community, as they applied to whites only. To compound this problem, local hospitals barred African-American physicians from practice and no local training institutes existed for black nurses.<sup>38</sup> Finally, in 1919, after being prompted by the

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<sup>37</sup> Thurman Rice, M.D., *The Hoosier Health Officer: A Biography of Dr. John N. Hurty and the History of the Indiana State Board of Health to 1925* (Indianapolis: The Indiana State Board of Health, 1946), 201-04.

<sup>38</sup> Thornbrough, "The History of Black Women in Indiana," 75.



fear of infection, white politicians allocated limited public funds to fight tuberculosis in the black community.<sup>39</sup>

Issues of healthcare neglect were nothing new to the black community. Across America, racism prevented African Americans from receiving adequate healthcare. Thus, the black community dealt by itself with almost all matters regarding the health and well being of black citizens.<sup>40</sup> In 1905 the women of WIC rose to the challenge and obtained permission from William Haueisen, a white businessman, to establish an outdoor tuberculosis camp on his Oak Hill property. The camp operated during the summer and consisted of three tents and a portable cottage that served as the nurse's residence and kitchen.<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, due to lack of resources, the camp often closed earlier in the summer than planned. Never daunted, the members of WIC solicited funds for their camp from whomever in both the black and white communities. They waged the battle against tuberculosis with their outdoor camp until the encroachment of new homes forced its closure in 1916.<sup>42</sup>

WIC members supported their camp through a number of sources. The women primarily relied on the black community -- everyone from successful businessmen, to local churches, and even other women's clubs -- to donate what they could to the fresh air

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 246-48. At this time, Dr. Alfred Henry wrote Mayor Charles Jewett of Indianapolis to indicate that the prevalence of tuberculosis in the black community threatened the rest of (white) Indianapolis.

<sup>40</sup> See Lynn Smith, "Sick and Tired of Being Sick and Tired: Black Women and the National Negro Health Movement, 1915-1950" (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991) for a detailed analysis on the role black women played in securing adequate healthcare for blacks across America.

<sup>41</sup> Ferguson, "The Woman's Improvement Club," 250.

<sup>42</sup> (Undated) Speech notes on the history of the WIC, c. 1963.

camp.<sup>43</sup> Both the *Indianapolis Recorder* and *Indianapolis News* appealed to the black and white communities for supplies such as pillows, cots, sheets, towels, fresh eggs, and canned goods.<sup>44</sup> In these requests, especially the ones placed in the (white) *Indianapolis News*, the WIC asked that donors drop donations off at the Charity Organization Society, rather than the camp.<sup>45</sup> This strategy allowed white donors to give to the fresh air camp without encouraging them to tour the facilities where they might critique -- and try to direct -- the activities of the WIC.<sup>46</sup>

Ambivalence toward financial assistance from white sources continued during World War I, when resources were extremely limited. For example, after the camp closed, the clubwomen decided to exhaust their own funds to hire a social worker before accepting any money from the War Chest.<sup>47</sup> Woman's Improvement Club members were wary of the white community because of bad experiences concerning broken promises. For instance, after petitioning the Flower Mission for assistance in 1916, WIC members were told the Flower Mission "would be glad at any time to accept [black] patients."<sup>48</sup> However, club minutes indicate that in 1918 the women again found themselves

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<sup>43</sup> WIC Minutes, September 9 and 15, 1911.

<sup>44</sup> *Indianapolis Recorder*, July 31, 1909, and *Indianapolis News*, July 22, 29, and August 5, 1905.

<sup>45</sup> *Indianapolis News*, July 22, 29, and August 5, 1905.

<sup>46</sup> This is not to say that the WIC did not accept monetary gifts from white sources. In 1910, Lillian Thomas Fox secured a donation of five dollars a week from a Mrs. Oaks, matron of the City Dispensary, until fifty dollars was reached. WIC Minutes, May 19, 1910.

<sup>47</sup> WIC Minutes, June 18, 1918.

<sup>48</sup> WIC Minutes, November 23, 1916.

organizing committees “to investigate conditions at the Flower Mission and to find how to get [African-American] patients admitted.”<sup>49</sup> Not until 1938 did the Flower Mission, after years of requests from the WIC, provide a segregated ward in its hospital.

Between the closing of the WIC fresh air camp and the opening of hospital doors to black tubercular patients twenty-two years elapsed. During this time, the members of WIC changed their strategy, but not their purpose. After the camp closed, members engaged in educational programs, home nursing, and social work. The clubwomen visited local churches and gave slide presentations on the prevention of tuberculosis.<sup>50</sup> WIC member and “friendly visitor” Daisy Brabham also served the community by going to the homes of those in need and referring them to other service organizations.<sup>51</sup> In 1922, the WIC took over the abandoned Sisters of Charity Hospital and began treatment of those suffering from advanced tuberculosis. After two years, the WIC closed this establishment and operated a cottage where tubercular patients received treatment. By this time, the members of the WIC decided to solicit the Community Fund of Indianapolis to finance the employment of a trained nurse. The WIC ran their cottage until 1938 when the Flower Mission finally created a segregated ward.

Not only did the WIC run its own programs, but it also supported the programs of other black-run organizations, especially those interested in tuberculosis. For example, the WIC supported the first fresh-air school for black children in Indianapolis by

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<sup>49</sup> WIC Minutes, February 21, 1918.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> WIC Minutes, March 8, 1918.

sponsoring numerous fund raising events and by directly donating money.<sup>52</sup> As with their own fresh air camp, Woman's Improvement Club members held parties and other "entertainments" that relied on the participation of the black community. The clubwomen even involved local children by throwing parties for them in which treats could be purchased.<sup>53</sup> Children's parties always seemed to delight WIC clubwomen, as these parties were "the one day of the year when the children [were] all important."<sup>54</sup> Parties, lemonade sales, and lawn fetes, enjoyable but socially responsible events, allowed the WIC to generate additional sources of income for their works and the works of others. Moreover, these kinds of events allowed other concerned African Americans to participate in making their community better and gave children the chance to just be children. The idea of "self-help" through community involvement permeated the efforts of the WIC. Sponsorship of events that allowed mass participation helped foster the idea that blacks could help improve the lot of their race while empowering themselves.

Community service or "uplift" work was a goal not only of the WIC, but also of the NACW. Such work would not only improve the lives of others, but also had the potential to improve the status of black women. An excerpt from the 1897 NACW Constitution reads: "We the Colored women of America, feeling the need of united and systematic effort, and hoping to furnish evidence of the moral, mental, and material progress made by people of color through the efforts of our women, do hereby unite in a

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<sup>52</sup> WIC Minutes, January 4, March 21, April 24, December 26, 1917, and January 21, 1918.

<sup>53</sup> WIC Minutes, April 14, 28, 1917.

<sup>54</sup> WIC Minutes, December 26, 1917.

National Association of Colored Women.”<sup>55</sup> By conducting “good works” and attempting to help other African Americans to improve their lives, black women, including the women of the WIC, hoped to show that they were just as respectable as their white counterparts. Accomplishing this goal was not without some ironies.

When reviewing WIC club minutes, one gets the distinct impression these women had little timidity about public speaking. Unlike the Indianapolis Woman’s Club records, complaints regarding a lack of dialogue are not present in WIC papers. Certain Victorian notions of propriety simply did not fit the reality of black women’s lives. White women who spoke in public were often perceived as scandalous and devoid of “ladylike” qualities. (Undoubtedly, this kind of reasoning affected the white women of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club.) Black women, on the other hand, were not even considered “ladies” in the Victorian sense of the word -- due to their color, they were immoral by definition.<sup>56</sup> Ironically, in order to change this perception, African American women had to break one of the cardinal rules of “ladylike” behavior -- remaining in the domestic sphere -- in order to prove their “ladylike” respectability. If these women wished to be viewed as moral and respectable, they had to visibly assert themselves in public by attending institutions of higher learning, joining clubs, and working among the

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<sup>55</sup> Davis, *Lifting as they Climb*, 41.

<sup>56</sup> See Moses, “Domestic Feminism,” 166-77, and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, “Discrimination Against Afro-American Women in the Woman’s Movement, 1883-1920,” in *Afro-American Women: Struggles and Images*, ed. Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn (Port Washington, N.Y.: National University Publications, 1978), 17-27.

disadvantaged.<sup>57</sup> Only in this way could black women possibly stimulate discussion in the dominant white society regarding the treatment of all African Americans, including themselves.

Therefore, when fighting for the health and safety of African-American Hoosiers, WIC clubwomen also fought to improve the perception white Hoosiers held of African-American women. If the WIC could prove its membership contained intelligent and gracious women, then perhaps WIC members might gain the same kind of respect given to white women of parallel class standing. Appearing as proper ladies who deserved respect as *ladies* meant a great deal to the WIC's members. They followed parliamentary procedure in their meetings, wrote a sophisticated club constitution, and limited their membership to ensure nominees of high social standing.<sup>58</sup> WIC clubwomen also investigated the worthiness and morality of the tuberculosis patients they assisted.<sup>59</sup> By selectively choosing whom to aid, WIC clubwomen could present their work as beyond reproach and give white Hoosiers positive images of African Americans to consider.

At the same time, cultural ideals of womanhood and rampant racism forced the clubwomen of the Woman's Improvement Club to embrace a conservatism rooted in accommodationist-type attitudes, at least in their public endeavors. As amazing as their accomplishments were, the clubwomen of WIC were not overtly radical in their actions.

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<sup>57</sup> In "The Impact of the 'Cult of True Womanhood' on the Education of Black Women," Perkins argues that the need for "race uplift" ushered many black women into higher education. Unlike many white families, black families viewed education as more than a mechanism for improving domestic skills. Instead, education provided a means for black women to improve the entire race. Perkins overlooks the irony that black women's efforts to improve the race helped them claim the status of "lady," 17-28.

<sup>58</sup> WIC Constitution, undated copy in the 1909-11 Minute Book.

<sup>59</sup> WIC Minutes, July 13, 1909.

Not only did they create an elite club and validate the worthiness of health care recipients, they also generally only sought assistance from outside sources by traditional means of correspondence and committee inquiry.<sup>60</sup> As frustrating as their work was at times, the records indicate they did not express anger towards the white groups that promised one thing and did another. On explosive issues such as lynching, WIC members sent letters thanking politicians for their support on anti-lynching measures, but there is no evidence the women ever held boycotts or rallies to draw attention to the matter.<sup>61</sup> WIC members perhaps took more of an accommodationist stance than they would have preferred, but the era and state in which they lived offered little chance of success with other tactics. WIC clubwomen understood the context of their historical era and the nature of the state in which they lived. They concentrated on what could be done immediately to make life better for themselves and others.

In their pursuit to create a more just world, WIC members expanded their ties with other black clubwomen. Although they often struggled to locate material resources, WIC clubwomen regularly voted to help other organizations. They assisted the Alpha Home financially (at one point even requiring each WIC member to give an additional 10¢ in dues one week) and materially by supplying furniture and extra foodstuffs.<sup>62</sup> Additionally, although the women sometimes debated the merits (and dues requirements)

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<sup>60</sup> Again, as Frederickson argues in “Each One is Dependent on the Other,” black clubwomen sometimes took the indirect route in their actions so as not to offend their white supporters and to also allow these white supporters to think the project was their idea in the first place, 296-324.

<sup>61</sup> WIC Minutes, April 21, 1918.

<sup>62</sup> WIC Minutes, January 4, 1911, May 2, and October 15, 1917.



of state federation membership, they ultimately stood in support of the federated system, especially when called by the state to support the work of the NACW in preserving Frederick Douglass's home as a memorial.<sup>63</sup>

Woman's Improvement Club members even worked with a group founded by a dissatisfied former president -- Lillian Brown's the Woman's Council (WC). Brown resigned her presidency of the WIC over what she perceived as mismanagement of camp funds. The incident must have been particularly ugly as the minutes report the actual statements of members regarding Brown's resignation (such detail is rarely found in WIC minutes).

Mrs. Brown stated that there had been remarks made by different members of the club which had been very hurtful to her feelings, and that she did not feel that she could work with a set of women who had the antagonistic spirit that the members of the club seemed to have toward her . . . . Mrs. Porter said she did not think any member of the club meant to antagonize or affront the President, but that we are all women, and as such we have a right to our own opinions.<sup>64</sup>

Brown attended the next WIC meeting with a list of demands regarding how the fresh air camp should be run if she were to remain the president. Brown remained president, but left the club two years later in 1911. Brown then became more active in the Woman's Council -- a club she founded in 1909 as a place for women to enhance their spiritual, educational, and cultural growth.<sup>65</sup> Shortly thereafter, the WC became a major supporter of Lincoln Hospital -- Indianapolis's first black hospital. Despite personal differences between the two clubs, the WIC and the WC worked together in support of Lincoln

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<sup>63</sup> WIC Minutes, September 20, 1917.

<sup>64</sup> WIC Minutes, June 3, 1909.

<sup>65</sup> National Council of Negro Women -- Indianapolis Section Collection, 1915-1985, The Woman's Council 1909-1975 Folder, IHS Library.



Hospital and even petitioned the Flower Mission together in 1916.<sup>66</sup> Woman's Improvement Club and Woman's Council clubwomen knew they had to rely on each other for success. Their bonds as black clubwomen meant more than personal feelings. Like members of the (white) Indianapolis Woman's Club, WIC members developed a strong sense of female consciousness within their club. Yet, they also developed a strong sense of obligation and respect toward other clubwomen based not only on their sense of gender but also the knowledge that as *black* clubwomen they must support each other if their groups were to succeed.

While race played a profound role in how the clubwomen connected to each other, their selection of literary topics illustrates a keen awareness of the importance gender played in their lives. Woman-centered topics presented at meetings included titles such as the life of Elizabeth Greenfield (a black missionary), "Womanhood," "The White Slave Trade," and "Women's Rights and Especially of the Importance of Negro Women Being Alive to Their Opportunities."<sup>67</sup> Empowering topics such as these were yet another source of pride that helped keep the women steadfast and focused. Of course, race and a sense of racial duty affected these women tremendously. Discounting the importance of gender identity, however, would discount influential societal forces concerning gender. After all, they did create the *Woman's* Improvement Club. The combination of gender and race forged a sense of consciousness that aided the women in constructing roles for themselves as influential community leaders.

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<sup>66</sup> Ferguson, "A Community Affair," 5 and WIC Minutes, November 23, 1916.

<sup>67</sup> WIC Minutes, February 3, 1910, January 19, May 4, 1911, and July 19, 1917.

The meeting spaces WIC clubwomen created also bolstered a sense of shared consciousness. Obviously, the Oak Hill tuberculosis camp constituted the ultimate of all “spaces” created by the WIC and filled the women with a great deal of pride. However, their meeting spaces also helped create tight bonds. Unlike IWC (and *Damenverein*) clubwomen, WIC clubwomen did not have a formal physical structure such as the Propylaeum. Instead, they gathered in each other’s homes and churches. Whereas the Propylaeum benefited (white) IWC members by aiding in their development of pride and cohesiveness, meeting in each other’s homes and churches helped encourage a profound sense of community between the African-American women of the Woman’s Improvement Club.

Moreover, as Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues, it was in black churches that women first developed their leadership abilities and it was in their faith that many women found the strength they needed to continue their community service work.<sup>68</sup> The clubwomen of the WIC certainly held fast to their sense of religion and used their faith to help them keep focused on their larger goals rather than their personal differences.

Every WIC meeting began with the following prayer:

Keep us, O God, from pettiness; let us be large in thought, in word,  
in deed.  
Let us be done with faultfinding, and leave off self-seeking . . .  
Grant that we may realize that it is the little things that create differences,  
that in the big things of life we are all one.  
And may we strive to touch and to know the great common woman’s  
heart of us all; and, O Lord God – let us not forget to be kind.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993). Higginbotham points out that black churches were essentially public places in the black community and multiple groups used them as such.

<sup>69</sup> WIC 1916-1918 Minute Book.

The clubwomen of the WIC needed to draw on their sense of religion and on their connectedness as black women because the work they set out to accomplish was so terribly difficult. The “uplift” on an entire race is not a task many would willingly embrace. Although the tenets of “true womanhood” did not always ring true given the reality of black clubwomen, these women did, as Paula Giddings argues, view themselves as a moral force which had the potential to reshape race relations in America.<sup>70</sup> Such responsibility had to have weighed heavily on the hearts and minds of the women of WIC. Given their beliefs regarding the importance of their work and the role black women played in uplifting the race, if clubwomen failed in their efforts, then the whole race suffered.<sup>71</sup>

Woman’s Improvement Club members drew their strength from each other and their community. They embraced their social responsibilities and created roles for themselves as community leaders. They also challenged white society to re-think its perception of black women and to consider black women as “ladies” -- that is, as moral women who deserved respect based on their sense of propriety and middle-class values, but who also knew how to organize and get a job done. Ironically, embracing certain aspects of the stereotypical “true woman” allowed the women of the WIC to develop a stronger sense of female consciousness that only further encouraged independence and

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<sup>70</sup> Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: W. Morrow, 1984).

<sup>71</sup> Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 24. White chronicles the ideologies that shaped the endeavors of black clubwomen and influenced how they dealt with the issues of race, gender, and class. White contends the ideology of the black race rising no higher than its women held great pitfalls and placed a tremendous psychological and emotional burden on black women.

determination to better their worlds. Despite their accommodationist/conservative attitudes, the clubwomen of the WIC made a difference in the lives of the black citizens of Indianapolis. They also helped make society more accepting of the rights *all* women have to be heard.

## Chapter 4 – “Get Up a Discussion”: The *Athenaeum Damenverein*

### “Strong Minds in Strong Bodies”

-- American Turners Motto

In 1919, the president of the Indianapolis *Damenverein*, a German-American woman’s club, spoke to the current club members about the hardships they all had faced due to the war. Attendance had plummeted, morale was low, and, due to local anti-German sentiment, the women had been instructed by their male counterpart, the Indianapolis *Socialer Turnverein*, not to speak the German language during meetings. Even the name of their meeting house had changed from *Das Deutsche Haus* to the *Athenaeum*.<sup>1</sup> The president urged members to stay apprised of what was going on within their community and to “get up a discussion” by attending all club meetings.<sup>2</sup> In essence, she asked the women of the *Damenverein* to continue what they had been doing since the club’s inception -- to unite in their shared sense of identity and to strengthen ties to their

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<sup>1</sup> Fully completed in 1898, *Das Deutsche Haus* was built primarily under the direction of the *Turners* as a German-American civic center.

<sup>2</sup> *Damenverein President’s Report, 1919, Athenaeum Damenverein & Women’s Auxiliary Records, 1876-1999, Indiana University-Purdue University at Indianapolis Special Collections and Archives, University Library (hereafter, “IUPUI”). All English-translated Damenverein records located in the IUPUI Archives appear in English in the footnotes. All non-translated records appear in German.*

German heritage. Throughout their early history, however, *Damenverein* members achieved much more than the celebration of their ancestry. Within their club, the women developed an internal culture in which they found encouragement to challenge their minds and bodies as well as a sense of control and influence outside of the home. Although influenced by ethnic traditionalism, these women developed a sense of female and communal consciousness that ultimately chipped away at traditional gender ideologies.<sup>3</sup>

The *Damenverein*, which still exists today, formed in 1876. Like the clubwomen of the Indianapolis Woman's Club and the Woman's Improvement Club, the German-American women who ventured into club work soon formed strong bonds based on their gender. Additionally, much like the African-American women of the Woman's Improvement Club, *Damenverein* clubwomen built strong communal bonds within their "outsider" community. African-American and German-American women lived and worked in ethnic communities that created unique sets of boundaries, opportunities, and ideologies. These forces shaped a female consciousness in both groups that intertwined with a sense of communal consciousness. In other words, a dual sense of consciousness helped these groups to understand what their communities expected of them based not

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<sup>3</sup> Alida Joyce Moonen, "The Missing Half: The Experience of Women in the Indianapolis Athenaeum Turnverein Women's Auxiliary, 1876-1919" (Ph.D. diss., The Ohio State University, 1993), 23. Moonen is the first to argue that the women of the *Damenverein* combined a sense of female and communal consciousness, however, her study focuses more on the history of the *Turner* organization as a whole and how the *Damenverein* "fit" into a male organization.

only on their sex and social (class) identities, but also on their cultural backgrounds and traditions as ethnic Americans.<sup>4</sup>

Products of their time and place, *Damenverein* clubwomen did not interact with black women's organizations despite these shared experiences and dual consciousness. As Donna Gabaccia points out in *From the Other Side*, the desire of many immigrant women to find comfort and stability within their own ethnic communities did not push them toward greater contact with other groups.<sup>5</sup> Nor are bridges between the *Damenverein* and other (native-born white) women's groups evident in the records.<sup>6</sup> Unlike black women who found it difficult to work with white groups because of racism, *Damenverein* members chose to maintain a high level of ethnic identity that separated them from what they sensed to be the more dominant Anglo-Saxon world of women's club work. *Damenverein* clubwomen came from a German tradition that perceived "conventional" American women's clubs as meddling. They viewed middle-class native-born white women as having too much leisure time and as trying to impose their own values on the rest of society.<sup>7</sup>

The liberal *Turner* tradition of freethinking, anticlericalism, and physical exercise for both sexes played no small part in separating *Damenverein* clubwomen from other

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<sup>4</sup> See Temma Kaplan, "Female Consciousness and Collective Action: The Case of Barcelona, 1910-1918," *Signs* 7 (Spring 1982): 545-66.

<sup>5</sup> Donna Gabaccia, *From the Other Side: Women, Gender, and Immigrant Life in the U.S., 1820-1990* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 77.

<sup>6</sup> Neither my research, nor that of Alida Joyce Moonen in the "The Missing Half" (77-78), uncovered any relationships between the *Damenverein* and other women's clubs.

<sup>7</sup> Don Heinrich Tolzmann, *The German American Experience* (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2000), 232-234.

clubwomen as well. Yet, despite their liberal *Turner* background (discussed below), the clubwomen of the *Damenverein* were not immune to the discourse of the day regarding the proper role of women, including the belief that women should not exert themselves physically. Nor was their *Turner* background so liberal as to eradicate all notions of “Old World” gender relations. In more cases than not, *Damenverein* members acquiesced to the wishes of the men in their lives.<sup>8</sup> *Damenverein* clubwomen demonstrated a certain level of conservatism or ethnic traditionalism in their actions because they were not immune to the dominant ideologies of their era or their cultural (i.e., patriarchal) backgrounds.<sup>9</sup>

*Damenverein* clubwomen were not feminists who overtly tried to change power relations between men and women. They typically clung to traditional women’s work. For example, responsibility toward child and community welfare and the maintenance of traditional foodways were a large part of what being a “good” (German-American) woman meant to *Damenverein* members. Unlike the IWC and WIC, the *Damenverein* did not exist as an autonomous organization but as an auxiliary to the *Turnverein*. This is not to imply, however, that the women of the *Damenverein* accomplished or contributed little to a growing sense of female autonomy at the turn of the last century. On the contrary, these women formed a unique identity based on gender and ethnicity that

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<sup>8</sup> Such acquiescence was expected because it was German-American men, not women, who formed the *Damenverein*. Because they needed assistance running their organization, *Turner* men created a women’s auxiliary for the express purpose of assisting the *Turnverein*.

<sup>9</sup> See Christiane Harzig, “The Ethnic Female Public Sphere: German-American Women in Turn-of-the-Century Chicago,” in *Midwestern Women: Work, Community, and Leadership at the Crossroads*, ed. Lucy Eldersveld Murphy and Wendy Hamand Venet (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997), 141-57, for a discussion on the conservative nature of midwestern German-American women in Chicago.



allowed them to flourish as German Americans and as women of intelligence and extraordinary ability. Like the women of the IWC and WIC, whether they intended to or not, by juggling family and community volunteerism, *Damenverein* members reshaped traditional views on women.

Although “only” members of an auxiliary organization, the women of the *Damenverein* took great pride in their *Turner* heritage. Like earlier German immigrants, those who initially espoused the *Turner* philosophy in the mid- to late-1800s adapted nicely to life in Indiana. Educated and politically astute, these individuals quickly grasped American democratic ideals and worked hard to better themselves and their communities. *Turner* beliefs and practices revolved around the teachings of Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852) who believed passionately in individual freedom, constitutional government, and a strong body/mind connection. Jahn developed a gymnastic training program to prepare young German men in a fight to unite all of Germany.<sup>10</sup> After Germany’s failed 1848 revolution, many *Turners* fled to America to avoid persecution.<sup>11</sup> Arriving in America with a sense of political purpose, the *Turners* desired to incorporate their beliefs and practices into the mainstream of American life to make America a truly great society. The *Turners* firmly believed they could be good

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<sup>10</sup> In German, the verb “turnen” literally means, “to do gymnastics.”

<sup>11</sup> For more on *Turner* history and philosophy see, Robert Knight Barney, “Forty-Eighters and the Rise of the Turnverein Movement in America,” in *Ethnicity and Sport in North American History and Culture*, ed. George Eisen and David K. Wiggins (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1994): 19-42; Annette Hofmann, “One Hundred Fifty Years of Loyalty: The *Turner* Movement in the United States,” *Yearbook of German- American Studies* 34 (1999): 63-81; Henry Metzner, *History of the American Turners*, 4<sup>th</sup> rev. ed. (Louisville: National Council of the American Turners, 1989); and Eric Pumroy, “Historical Records of Turners in America,” in *Das Ohiotal -- The Ohio Valley -- The German Dimension*, ed. Don Heinrich Tolzmann (New York: P. Lang, 1993), 65-75.

U.S. citizens while retaining their cultural identity. In America, they developed a rich social life that revolved around the *Verein* (club).

In this regard, the *Turners* were not unlike other German Americans. In Indianapolis during the nineteenth century, *Vereinsleben* (club life) centered around a host of musical, educational, commercial, and political organizations. For example, the *Männerchor* and *Sängerchor* provided for musical and artistic expression, the *Freidenker* (or Free-Thinkers) explored alternative religious and educational ideals, and members of the *Freimänner Verein* lobbied for abolition as well other local, state, and national causes.<sup>12</sup> This diversity of organizations gave German Americans in Indianapolis a true sense of community. Religious, musical, and political groups allowed the German-American community to celebrate its heritage in whatever way they felt most comfortable. Each group fostered a sense of ethnic pride that boosted the morale of the entire community, regardless of differing personal and religious beliefs.

As with the groups mentioned above, *Turner* members loved to celebrate their German-ness. However, *Turners* also shared in unique beliefs regarding German heritage, individual freedom, and education. As liberal-minded “freethinkers,” the *Turners* rejected organized religion and embraced the scientific method. Moreover, they generally endorsed equality between the sexes. Many German Americans found these beliefs as radical as did their native-born counterparts. Of course, just as differences in opinion existed within the German-American community, differences also existed within *Turner* organizations.

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<sup>12</sup> See Giles R. Hoyt, “Germans,” in *Peopling Indiana: The Ethnic Experience*, ed. Robert M. Taylor and Connie A. McBirney (Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society, 1996), 161.

While Hoosier *Turners* generally agreed with the official decisions made by the national *Turnerbund* (the Turner umbrella organization), disputes sometimes arose between members. For example, the *Indianapolis Turnverein*, the predecessor to the *Indianapolis Socialer Turnverein*, expelled seventeen members after the Civil War because they refused to endorse the *Turnerbund*'s platform favoring the enfranchisement of former slaves. A few years later, the *Turnerbund* endorsed women's suffrage. This action hastened the split of the *Indianapolis Turnverein* in 1870 with the radical minority (those supporting suffrage) leaving to form the *Socialer Turnverein*.<sup>13</sup> The *Turnerbund* eventually forced the two groups to merge into the *Indianapolis Socialer Turnverein* in 1872.

In this context of a diversified German-American community and a sometimes fractious organization the *Damenverein* emerged. By the mid-1870s, after the formation of the *Indianapolis Socialer Turnverein*, male members had a hard time organizing a major expansion of social, educational, and gymnastic programs. On April 16, 1876, after a "call" had gone out through the local German-American press, eighteen women attended the first meeting of the *Turnschwwestern Verein* (Turner-Sisters).<sup>14</sup> A male *Turner* presided over the first meeting, but the women quickly elected their own officers to lead future meetings. According to the first club constitution, the *Damenverein*'s primary purpose was "to look after and to supervise the girl's *Turnschule* [gymnastic classes] . . . to work for the enlargement and extension of the library and its general use in

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<sup>13</sup> George Theodore Probst, *The Germans in Indianapolis: 1840-1918*, rev. and ed. by Eberhard Reichmann (Indianapolis: German-American Center and Indiana German Heritage Society, 1989), 70.

<sup>14</sup> *Damenverein Minutes*, April 16, 1876, IUPUI. The group officially became the *Damenverein* in 1883 and currently uses this name.

the *Verein* and to help with all the intellectual and social endeavors of the *Verein*.”<sup>15</sup> As daunting as this list of tasks might have seemed, one month after their first meeting, the women hosted a Founder’s Day Festival in their own honor!<sup>16</sup>

The *Damenverein* clubwomen spent the bulk of their time and effort organizing *Turnverein* social events and taking care of other “constitutional” duties. Incredibly, within their first year they broadened the scope of their activities within the German community. The members of the *Damenverein* held a Christmas party for poor German children, opened a soup kitchen, established a needlework school for girls, and formed a *Kranken* (sick) Committee to aid any Turner member in need.<sup>17</sup> Since the *Turnverein* had a close relationship with the *Freidenker Verein* (Free-Thinker Society), the *Damenverein* received invitations to *Freidenker* meetings, assisted with the German-English school, and even helped run the Free-Thinkers’ “Sunday School.”<sup>18</sup> Additionally, *Damenverein* members helped facilitate use of the organization’s *Halle* by other German-American clubs.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Statuten des Indianapolis Turn-Schwestern Verein, 1876.

<sup>16</sup> Damenverein Minutes, May 3, 1876.

<sup>17</sup> Damenverein Minutes, October 10, 1876, January 6, September 1, 1878, October 3, 1880. The women agreed to provide needles and thread to any child too poor to afford these needleworking items.

<sup>18</sup> Damenverein Minutes, November 2, December 21, 1879, April 4, 1880. Established in 1859, the German-English School (*Schulverein*) functioned as a private school where children learned the English and German languages as well as German heritage and history. Believing in few Christian tenets, the Free-Thinker “Sunday School” is not what it sounds like. The school trained young men to be rational, tolerant, and progressive German-Americans. See Probst, *The Germans in Indianapolis*, 70, 110, 134.

<sup>19</sup> Damenverein Minutes, January 8 and November 4, 1888.

The women of the *Damenverein* accomplished so much because they, like the members of the Indianapolis Woman's Club and the Woman's Improvement Club, believed in the importance of their work and in their own ability as intelligent women. Like the IWC and WIC, the *Damenverein* maintained a correspondence with other Turner women's auxiliaries, most notably with a club in Louisville. They communicated with other auxiliary groups mainly as a means to share information regarding constitutional matters and to coordinate regional events such as the *Turnfest* (a *Turner* sponsored sport and cultural festival).<sup>20</sup>

*Damenverein* clubwomen organized around their endeavors with the same amount of efficiency and dedication as the clubwomen of the Indianapolis Woman's Club and the Woman's Improvement Club. For instance, within five months of the organization's founding, the women decided to host a large picnic and sports show that would serve as a community-bolstering event as well as general fundraiser for the *Turnverein*. They solicited the use of a farm to hold the picnic and competitions, coordinated the scheduling of "express" street railway cars for the duration of the day, sent out 300 invitations, and utilized their newly created Economics Committee to handle the booking of a band and to sell beer, wine, and cigars.<sup>21</sup>

The clubwomen used committees extensively to aid in their efforts. Throughout the year, the president appointed committees to oversee specific activities. So that no one individual ever became overwhelmed, members rotated their committee assignments and

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<sup>20</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, April 16, 1876, June 2, 1878, February 4, April 1, 1883, September 7, 1884.

<sup>21</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, September 14, 1876.

tasks. Members participated in the *Kranken* Committee one month and then worked at the needlework school or assisted the *Turnlehrer* (gymnastics instructor) with the girls' physical education classes the next.<sup>22</sup> The *Damenverein* also established an Intellectual Committee that encouraged members to attend lectures and cultural events sponsored by the *Turnverein*.<sup>23</sup>

The importance of intellectual development was paramount in *Turner* ideology. The Forty-Eighters who originally brought *Turner* beliefs and practices to America reveled in their new personal freedoms. They believed in the power of democracy and the importance of maintaining a tolerant society. Educational and cultural exchanges, they believed, were the best ways to create an informed citizenry. With these high expectations in mind, many early German immigrants found local attitudes towards the arts and intellectual life lacking in smaller American cities. The *Verein*, therefore, served not only to keep German heritage alive, but also to further intellectual development which in turn would help create "good" citizens who understood democracy.<sup>24</sup> The clubwomen of the early *Damenverein* were raised in this tradition of intellectualism and embraced it as their own.

*Damenverein* clubwomen served as library assistants in the *Turners'* private library and held their own subscription to the local *Freidenker* newspaper.<sup>25</sup> Such access

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<sup>22</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, September 14, 1876, February 2, 1879, March 5, 1882, May 4, 1884, October 4, 1885. The minutes for August 7, 1887, indicate that needlework instructors were becoming hard to find and all members were required to instruct at least two classes or be fined.

<sup>23</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, October 1, 1882.

<sup>24</sup> Hoyt, "Germans," 160.

<sup>25</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, December 3, 1876, August, 31, 1878.

exposed the women to the radical writings of the Forty-Eighters and Free-Thinkers as well as to general works related to science, German and English literature, history, and an assortment of German-language newspapers and journals.<sup>26</sup> The women undoubtedly used these resources when they entered district writing competitions on topics such as “What is the Value of Turn-Sister Clubs and Trainee Clubs for the Turnverein?” and “Should Equal Education of Both Sexes be Endorsed?”<sup>27</sup> The women even combined their intellectual endeavors with other tasks. For example, needlework instructors read to young girls while as they learned to crochet and knit.<sup>28</sup>

The *Turners* stressed intellectual growth so that democratic principles would remain strong in America. Despite their lack of full and equal voting rights, the importance of democracy did not escape the attention of the women. When asked to perform certain tasks by the *Turnverein*, the women always discussed the matter internally and then voted. The annual elections held by the *Damenverein* were of high importance. Once, in 1884, a member proposed that the club officers of the previous year simply be reinstated by acclamation. Fraulein Oppenheimer, the recording secretary, voiced her objection by stating that she was “in principle opposed to such abuse of the vote.”<sup>29</sup> Although another thirty-six years would pass from when Frl. Oppenheimer made

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<sup>26</sup> See Dolores J. Hoyt, “The Role of Libraries in the American Turner Organizations” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 1993) for an overview of the importance of libraries in early Turner organizations.

<sup>27</sup> *Damenverein Minutes*, July 2, 1882, August 12, 1883.

<sup>28</sup> *Damenverein Minutes*, March 6, 1881.

<sup>29</sup> *Damenverein Minutes*, June 1, 1884.



this statement to when women would gain the right to full suffrage, *Damenverein* members already appreciated the responsibility that accompanied the vote.

The clubwomen of the *Damenverein* appear to have had little trouble asserting themselves intellectually. However, they still had to conquer certain notions regarding “ladylike” behavior. In her 1886 president’s report, Frau Bohn stated she was proud of the club’s intellectual endeavors, however, she was also

. . . of the opinion that our sisters could do more in this respect in the future. I heartily support the maintenance of this intellectual activity for the next year so that we can inspire our youth -- both physically and intellectually -- with the true maturational, educational, and social principles of our *Verein*.<sup>30</sup>

Bohn was expressing her concern that although the women took an active part in intellectual events, they lacked interest in other areas -- primarily those areas that dealt with *physical* activities. As the club constitution set forth, the women had the responsibility of promoting and monitoring the girls’ gymnastic classes. Yet, women in the late nineteenth century simply were not supposed to exert themselves physically. Despite their *Turner* backgrounds, getting the younger members of the *Damenverein*, or even young girls, to attend gymnastic classes proved quite difficult.<sup>31</sup> Ironically, male *Turnverein* members stressed the need for physical education and strongly advocated the women’s involvement.<sup>32</sup> Clearly, the women were not always comfortable embracing the full spectrum of liberal *Turner* philosophies.

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<sup>30</sup> *Damenverein Minutes*, 1886 President’s Report.

<sup>31</sup> *Damenverein Minutes*, March 4, 1877, October 3, 1880, November 5, 1882, September 9, 1887.

<sup>32</sup> *Damenverein Minutes*, June 5, 1881.



*Damenverein* clubwomen were not the only members who found the liberal nature of national *Turner* philosophy difficult to endorse. So did some men. The majority of Indianapolis *Turner* men did not support woman suffrage, although the *Turnerbund* (the national *Turner* organization) supported it.<sup>33</sup> (In this respect, *Turner* men were more in line with their conservative Hoosier brethren.) The *Turnverein* members even appear to have been somewhat nervous regarding their “creation” of a woman’s club. Eight months after the formation of the *Damenverein* -- that is, eight months after the clubwomen had held formal elections, hosted a Founder’s Day Fest, organized a *Turnverein* supper, sponsored a large picnic and sport show, formed a committee to visit the girls’ gymnastic classes, and planned a Thanksgiving concert and buffet -- a representative of the *Turnverein* showed up at a meeting because there needed to be a “greater connection” between the two groups.<sup>34</sup> Men attended various meetings throughout the early days of the club. They often requested that the women form committees that matched of the *Turnverein* ones and that they report on their activities at *Turnverein* meetings.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> The representatives of the 1872 National Convention of the American Turners issued an official document regarding why women should be allowed to vote. A lengthy document, the crux of their argument rested in the belief that “Humanity demands equal rights for all humans, because only then may we have an equal chance for a secure and happy life.” 1872 Minutes, National Convention of American Turners, IUPUI.

<sup>34</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, December 3, 1876, IUPUI.

<sup>35</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, February 4, 1877, November 2, 1879, October 1, 1882, October 4, 1885, November 1, 1885, IUPUI. The clubwomen sometimes also received invitations to special *Turner* meetings and events so that they might stay fully apprised on *Turnverein* activities. The fact that upon invitation the women usually formed food committees to provide refreshments for the events likely had something to do with the *Turnverein* granting them an invitation.

For the most part, *Damenverein* members did not appear to have a problem with (male) *Turnverein* members exerting themselves in club affairs. The *Damenverein* clubwomen viewed themselves as an integral part of the *Turnverein* and the German-American community. Concentrating on what was best for the group, they rarely complained or expressed discontent. The only exception came when the *Damenverein* lost their parlor spaces in 1908. At this time the Normal College of the North American Gymnastic Union (the premier *Turner* physical education school) moved to Indianapolis and took up residence in *Das Deutsche Haus*. During this transition the women lost their three large parlor rooms and were forced into smaller rooms. Although the women never overtly challenged the move, the loss of the parlor spaces has never been far from their collective memory.<sup>36</sup>

The women took pride in their meeting spaces even before *Das Deutsche Haus* was built. By 1888, the women had purchased a table, dresser, carpeting, and other items for their parlor spaces in the *Turnverein's Halle*. Protective of their space, the clubwomen debated then whether they should let visitors from other clubs use this area and its furnishings.<sup>37</sup> These feelings intensified after the construction of *Das Deutsche Haus*. After all, the women's fundraising efforts (a small admission fee was charged at almost every social event) helped maintain *Turner* facilities, including the women's parlor spaces. For these reasons, the loss of the parlor spaces in *Das Deutsche Haus* – and institution that thrived in part because of these clubwomen – created a great deal of

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<sup>36</sup> The current *Damenverein* clubwomen have recently restored and reclaimed these parlor rooms – 95 years after they were lost!

<sup>37</sup> *Damenverein Minutes*, January 8, 1888, IUPUI.

sorrow for the women.<sup>38</sup> As with the other clubwomen in this study, the meeting space created by the *Damenverein* instilled a great deal of pride within the group. The sense of loss felt by the members illustrates that they had an awareness of the limitations placed upon them as a non-autonomous organization.

With the exception of their parlor spaces, members of the *Damenverein* did not generally resent the men of the *Turnverein*. Attacking the men would have equaled an attack on the group and *Damenverein* clubwomen believed in group over individual needs. Moreover, they were not radical women when it came to traditional gender norms. The men of the *Turnverein* had ultimate authority and the women did not view it as their place to challenge this authority.

A sense of tradition and propriety guided the *Damenverein* just as it did the other women in this study. For example, the “Terms of Admission” in the *Damenverein* constitution called for all new members to have a “blameless character.”<sup>39</sup> (A free-thinking atheist was one thing, but a loose woman was another!) Undoubtedly, not all of the women supported the *Turner* platform on suffrage or believed in the need for physical exercise. Perhaps a sense of newly felt Victorian propriety is why, like the Indianapolis Woman’s Club, the *Damenverein* had problems with early members resigning without reason.<sup>40</sup> Despite the liberal *Turner* ideologies that informed their lives, these women were not feminists who wished to shake off all of their Old World ways or their growing sense of American middle-class values.

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<sup>38</sup> Moonen, “The Missing Half,” 153-54. See also, undated *Damenverein* speech by Elisa Ulrich Spath, c. 1960s.

<sup>39</sup> Statuten des Indianapolis Turn-Schwestern Verein, 1876.

<sup>40</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, April 23, 1876, March 10, 1878.

Overall, the women deferred to the men when asked, did not engage in traditional political activities, and faithfully espoused group identity (i.e., German-American and *Turner* identity) over that of the individual. In her 1882-83 President's Report, Frau Köhne told the women that,

At this point it might be appropriate to mention how important it is that we, like the *Turners*, put the work before the individual. It is my opinion that a *Verein* founded upon principles can only achieve success when all personalities are consumed by the wish that the honorable purposes are promoted by the group.<sup>41</sup>

*Damenverein* members truly believed in the good of the *Turnverein* as a whole, strong family ties, and their German heritage. Relegating these concerns to secondary positions made no sense given their cultural background. German culture dictated a patriarchal structure in the home (and *Verein*) that even *Damenverein* clubwomen could not escape, nor did they necessarily want to. As Christiane Harzig points out in "The Ethnic Female Public Sphere," German-American (club)women did not compete with men regarding home or club matters; however, their public roles as clubwomen enabled them to carve out unique niches for themselves that enhanced their communities.<sup>42</sup> By maintaining traditional family structures and serving the group as opposed to the individual, the clubwomen of the *Damenverein* became *the* stewards of ethnic identity within the *Turnverein*. This new self-created role allowed the women to extend their influence within the scope of their daily lives without losing touch with their stability-giving traditional backgrounds.

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<sup>41</sup> *Damenverein* Minutes, President's Report 1882-83.

<sup>42</sup> Harzig, "The Ethnic Female Public Sphere," 145, 154.

Like the black women of the Woman's Improvement Club, who also shared a sense of dual ethnic (or racial) and gender identity, German-American women's association with the ethnic group often overshadowed identity as an individual woman. While a sense of communal consciousness instilled great pride in these women, it also led them to be somewhat conservative in their actions. They were ambivalent about the importance of physical exercise for women and they upheld the traditional (i.e., patriarchal) structure of the *Verein* and home. Yet, this ethnic traditionalism or conservatism is what gave these women a sense of empowerment. They provided their community with services that helped to keep German culture alive and by extension kept their community viable.

Due to inevitable cultural changes, as the years passed the *Damenverein* became more conservative in its actions. While early club minutes and reports reflect the importance of intellectual endeavors and the maintenance of *Turner* philosophies, second and third generation women shifted their focus from the intellectual goals and ideals of the Forty-Eighters and became more involved in the *Damenverein* social activities. Throughout the early 1900s, President, School Committee, and Drama Section reports reflect less and less attention on intellectual endeavors and more time spent on providing wholesome entertainment for children and fundraising for the *Turnverein*.<sup>43</sup> The new

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<sup>43</sup> Berichte der Präsidentin des Damenverein, 1908, 1915, 1916-17, 1917-18, Berichte des Schulkomitee, March 7, 1916, January 1917, May 6, 1917, Berichte der Dramatischen Sektion, May 6, 1917, May 5, 1918, and Berichte des Picknick Komitee, July 3, 1917, May 1, 1918, IUPUI.

library holdings of the *Verein* even became less radical during this time.<sup>44</sup> The entertainment and fundraising efforts of the *Damenverein* certainly took a great deal of skill and dedication; however, the radical nature of *Turnerism* was clearly disappearing by the early twentieth century. Acculturation was impossible to avoid and as club members became more Americanized, the radical nature of their organization changed.<sup>45</sup>

Regardless of their early sense of ethnic traditionalism or later, more “American” conservatism, *Damenverein* members challenged popular opinions concerning women. Early on they may have been less than successful in recruiting women to gymnastic classes, but by sponsoring such classes they directly challenged the conception that women would harm their reproductive organs by engaging in physical activity. Furthermore, by sponsoring public picnics, parades, and music festivals, the members of the *Damenverein* demonstrated that being a “good” American woman did not mean one had to be Anglo-American, a temperance follower, or inclined to domestic activities only. By supporting atypical school programs like the German-English School and by encouraging physical education for children, they also opened the door for other

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<sup>44</sup> Hoyt, “The Role of Libraries in the American Turner Organizations,” vi. Hoyt argues that as German Americans gained political and community influence, public institutions responded by improving their services. Public libraries, for example, incorporated more (mainstream) German language books into their holdings. Consequently, private collections dwindled and access to radical writings diminished.

<sup>45</sup> Cultural changes not only occurred within radical *Turner* organizations, but in all German-American organizations during the early twentieth century. As Kathleen Neils Conzen argues in “Immigrants, Immigrant Neighborhoods, and Ethnic Identity: Historical Issues,” *Journal of American History* 66 (December 1979): 108, while German cultural traits continued to be passed on within families, a strong sense of German community vanished due to the devastating impact World War I and prohibition had on public German-American institutions.

Americans to explore the benefits of *kindergartens* and mandatory physical education classes.

For the women of the *Damenverein*, female consciousness and communal consciousness based on ethnicity were not mutually exclusive. The *Damenverein* saw themselves as members of a larger group and this group identity also shaped the way they saw themselves as women. Even more than the other two clubs, the *Damenverein*'s established calendar of events helped the women combine their identity as women with their identity as German-American women. *Damenverein* clubwomen planned extravagant dinners and festivals celebrating everything from Christmas to Carnival. They laboriously orchestrated summer picnics and sport exhibitions for the entire *Turnverein*, especially the children. They planned the same events every year, always trying to improve upon the previous ones, and in the process created an environment in which they controlled the way heritage-rich celebrations took shape. The women of the *Damenverein*, not the men of the *Turnverein*, facilitated ethnic celebrations for entire families. Their roles as the organizers, and often the cooks, for social events was traditional and based on their sex. By serving as the gatekeepers of culture, however, these women created a unique set of circumstances for themselves and, as clubwomen, created cohesion in their community.

As the United States entered the war against Germany in 1917, maintaining a strong ethnic community became quite difficult for the women of the *Damenverein*. As mentioned earlier, the *Turnverein* informed the women in 1918 of its intention to conduct all meetings and record all proceedings in English. The *Turnverein* actually gave the women a choice regarding whether or not they would forgo use of the German language,



but as with most matters, the *Damenverein* sided with the *Turnverein*.<sup>46</sup> As anti-German tensions mounted in America, resignation letters also began to pour into the *Damenverein*.<sup>47</sup> The minutes and reports of the *Damenverein* did not openly blame any one person or party for these hardships. Fear of reprisal certainly kept them somewhat quiet on this matter. Yet, the women were not completely silent regarding the pain they felt over the current situation. Whereas the white, native-born women of the Indianapolis Woman's Club avoided the discussion of controversial topics and, therefore, any expression of their discontent, and the Woman's Improvement Club remained silent (in their official documents) regarding the racism and sexism they surely faced every day, *Damenverein* members expressed their disillusionment.

In 1918, the recording secretary noted with frustration that the "most important and unexpected event which took place during [her] term . . . was the changing of the minutes from German to English."<sup>48</sup> The Drama Section reported such low attendance in 1919 that they asked to be relieved of their duties altogether and observed "that unless the efforts of the section are supported by the members of the society, there is no success, and the result is that the section loses heart."<sup>49</sup> The School Committee even noted that the failure of the children's picnic they sponsored. The committee chair, Louisa Lehritter wrote, ". . . if in any way we have not given thorough satisfaction, we are very

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<sup>46</sup> *Damenverein* Records, *Turnverein* letter dated July 20, 1918. Interestingly, this letter is written in German.

<sup>47</sup> *Damenverein* Records, resignation letters dated, May 3, May 16, October 5, 1918, February 2, April [?], April 16, 22, 1919. All of these letters are in English and none directly cite fear of persecution as motivation for leaving the *Damenverein*.

<sup>48</sup> *Damenverein* Recording Secretary Report, 1918.

<sup>49</sup> *Damenverein* Drama Section Report, May 13, 1919.



sorry . . . . Not alone have national circumstances made our work hard, but the support given us by the society was very unsatisfactory.”<sup>50</sup> Such events caused the president to state in her annual address that “[t]he war has cast a gloom all over the world and our members . . . have not been spared. It has made people sad and thoughtful and the spirit for having pleasure has left us and we feel lost.”<sup>51</sup>

They might have felt lost, but they were not ready to give up. The president also told her members “to attend the meetings regularly and know what is going on. Get up a discussion. If you have nothing on hand, find something.”<sup>52</sup> Even when faced with an impossibly hard situation, the women of the *Damenverein* challenged each other to be better and to hold on to what made them unique. Scholars argue that German immigrants were the first to explore the full dynamics of what a multiethnic/pluralistic society could and should be in America.<sup>53</sup> Immigrant women such as the ones in the *Damenverein* not only explored how to be “good” *German* Americans but also how to be a new kind of woman in America -- a woman who understood the importance of tradition, but who also understood the importance of looking ahead; a woman whose identity as an American was tied to her ethnic roots *and* her gender.

World War I (and later prohibition) presented a grave challenge to *Damenverein* members, but they persevered. The *Athenaeum*, the former *Das Deutsche Haus*, served as a physical anchor that aided in the survival of German-American culture in

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<sup>50</sup> Damenverein School Committee Report, May 13, 1919.

<sup>51</sup> Damenverein President Report, 1919.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Hoyt, “Germans,” 158; Tolzmann, *The German American Experience*, 236.

Indianapolis. However, the dual consciousness experienced by the women of the *Damenverein* also enabled German culture to survive. These women found strength in each other and their heritage and continued to meet throughout the twentieth century.<sup>54</sup> Their activities and support helped keep the *Turner* society and the *Athenaeum* alive. Perhaps most fittingly, the current president of the *Athenaeum Turners* is a woman.

By serving their community in times of hardship, by endorsing *Turner* philosophies, and by finding unique ways to exercise their intellects, the clubwomen of the *Damenverein* developed a shared sense of identity as German Americans and as women. They challenged commonly held beliefs regarding women's physical fragility while proudly clinging to other Old World traditions. Most importantly, because these women gathered in the public sphere, exercised their intellects, and "got up a discussion" on a host of issues relevant to their lives, they helped create a new model of what a "proper" (American) woman could be.

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<sup>54</sup> Undoubtedly, the women's whiteness also aided in their efforts to bring about the eventual re-acceptance of German culture into American life. Unlike the African-American women of the Woman's Improvement Club, the women of the *Damenverein* "only" had to endure a few years of persecution. They did not have to deal with a combined legacy of racism and sexism that stretched back several centuries. They did not have the weight of the belief that they, as women, were the only ones who could redeem their race and right all of society's wrongs.

## Conclusion

**“It [club work] was the main interest in our lives . . . [we] practically lived for our society. And there was so much to do . . . The society never grew quickly, but it grew well and good.”**

-- Lola Steiert<sup>1</sup>

By outward appearances, the native-born white women of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club, the African-American women of the Woman’s Improvement Club, and the German-American women of the *Damenverein* appear to have had little in common. Although they all subscribed to middle-class values, they held different levels of social rank when compared to each other and experienced varying levels of influence and respect based on their race and ethnicity. Their differing life experiences shaped each club’s internal culture and influenced its activities. For example, the IWC participated in little community service because most of its members enjoyed the security of their social status and did not wish to challenge societal norms by appearing unladylike. WIC clubwomen engaged almost exclusively in community service, as the reality of their daily lives demanded action. Finally, the *Damenverein* would not have existed without the need to maintain their ethnic community. Moreover, because of the diverse life experiences of Indianapolis’s clubwomen, the nature of female consciousness within each

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<sup>1</sup> Lola Steiert, *Damenverein Founder’s Day Dinner Speech*, c. 1929, IUPUI.

group varied. For example, the female consciousness of the black women of the WIC and the German-born or -influenced women of the *Damenverein* was explicitly entwined with a sense of ethnic consciousness. These racial, ethnic, and societal differences also appear to have kept the women of this study from working together.

The most significant difference between these clubs was racial makeup. The white women of the Indianapolis Woman's Club and *Damenverein* did not have to contend with many of the issues familiar to the black women of the Woman's Improvement Club. As Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues in "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," black and white women experience gender in "racialized contexts."<sup>2</sup> In other words, although women share the same sex, how society views them as women depends on their race. Race affects not only how society views women, but also how women view themselves and their place within that society. While ethnic differences kept IWC and *Damenverein* clubwomen apart, their whiteness at least allowed each group more freedom of movement, expression, and economic advantage. Their race also relieved them of the psychological burden of feeling responsible for their *entire* racial (or ethnic) group.

Differences aside, these clubs shared certain similarities. For example, we cannot overlook that the dominant ideology of the day regarding how a "proper" woman should act similarly influenced all of the women in this study and fostered a strict sense of propriety within the clubs. Moreover, these women lived in a conservative state that did not embrace or encourage social change. The context of the time and place these women lived in influenced the structure of their clubs just as their womanhood did.

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<sup>2</sup> Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, "African-American Women's History and the Metalanguage of Race," *Signs* 17 (Winter 1992): 258.

Examples of their conservative natures exist in their club records: IWC members expressed timidity and concern regarding the propriety of certain discussion and paper topics; WIC clubwomen searched for the “best” candidates to send to Oak Hill; and the women of the *Damenverein* never formed their own independent organization. In other instances two clubs appear to have more in common with each other than with the third.

In some respects, the German-American women of the *Damenverein* shared more similarities with the African-American women in the WIC than the white native-born women of the IWC. The women of the WIC and *Damenverein* fused gender with ethnicity (or race) and developed a strong sense of communal consciousness, which then shaped their perceptions of themselves and their responsibilities as women. The number one sense of responsibility they felt regarded the maintenance of a strong and proud sense of racial or ethnic identity. With the IWC, however, maintaining a strong sense of ethnic identity never seemed as paramount. The women of the IWC most definitely loved all things British, as their meeting minutes are littered with accounts of papers given on British history, art, and literature; but as native-born white Americans they defined the norm in American society, and their celebration of Anglo culture was just that -- a celebration, not a defense of the very essence of their existence.

In other ways, however, the WIC and the IWC had the most in common, as they both formed with the expressed intention of being literary clubs. Both clubs followed Robert’s Rules of Order and amended their constitutions whenever the slightest change in format occurred. The WIC and IWC concerned themselves with appearances and sentiments concerning respectability. Although both groups had different reasons for wanting to be viewed as “ladies,” they both subscribed to the overall legitimacy of

Victorian notions on womanhood. The German-American women of the *Damenverein* did not adhere to the American doctrine of domesticity to the same degree as the other women, but Victorian notions affected them as well, especially regarding physical education classes. In their own ways, all of these clubwomen used the banner of “true womanhood” or “ladydom” to justify work, but altered it to fit their own realities.

Intellectual betterment also played a significant role within each of the clubs. Like clubwomen across the country, Indianapolis’s clubwomen believed they had the ability to further their minds and creativity through their club efforts. The women of the IWC and *Damenverein*, however, often engaged in intellectual endeavors while at the same time sponsoring social events. Large gatherings and banquets, such as the IWC’s President’s Day celebration and the *Damenverein*’s Founder’s Day Fest, featured papers or talks, but the overall nature of the gathering was social. The events hosted by the *Damenverein* often raised money for *Turner* endeavors and reminded the community of their heritage, but they, like the IWC, held other purely social celebrations. When the African American clubwomen of WIC organized large events, they focused on the direct needs of the community, especially disadvantaged children and the social aspects of their gatherings often appear secondary.

By making comparisons between the IWC, WIC, and *Damenverein*, I do not mean to downplay the significant role race played in shaping the lives of these clubwomen. Race should never be ignored, but commonalities based on gender and other factors should not be assumed irrelevant because of race. By not shying away from

trying to find these commonalities, this study is able to flush out the similarities between seemingly different groups of women. Additionally, an expanded definition of a “clubwoman” is an important analytical tool in this work.

This study is able to shed light on the similarities between three diverse Hoosier clubs because it does *not* define clubwomen as those who joined autonomous literary clubs affiliated with the General Federation of Women’s Clubs or the National Association of Colored Women’s Clubs. Rather, I have defined clubwomen as those who joined sex-segregated organizations, worked to better themselves and/or their communities, and united under a shared sense of female consciousness. The members of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club, Woman’s Improvement Club, and *Damenverein* looked different, but upon broader analysis, key similarities related to their underlying organizational structures, relative class privilege, sense of conservatism, and feelings towards each other are evident.

Therefore, although each group of clubwomen operated with its own agendas and goals, they all consisted of women who met, for the most part, privately to set about their chosen tasks with determination. They redefined a woman’s private domestic sphere to include club work, and in the process formed gender-based bonds that (in)directly influenced the public realm. By uniting as women who shared similar backgrounds and mindsets, they constructed a sense of female consciousness within their clubs that added to a growing sense of autonomy for American women.

The clubwomen in this study bettered themselves and their worlds by not blindly accepting prescribed roles and by expanding on their perceived duties. The white women of the Indianapolis Woman’s Club envisioned themselves as refined intellectuals and not

merely as caretakers of the home. They encouraged the intellectual advancement of their members and supported indirect forms of influence over the public sphere when necessary. The African-American clubwomen of the Woman's Improvement Club co-opted Victorian notions regarding women's respectability and infused these notions with the best traditions of their race to create roles for themselves as community leaders. The members of the *Damenverein* challenged commonly held beliefs regarding women's physical fragility and proudly clung to their heritage. All of these women, whether meaning to or not, defied convention by meeting outside their homes and spoke aloud on matters ranging from "Ibsen's woman" to tuberculosis to the importance of physical education for women.

Differences definitely existed between each of these clubs, but the similarities are too striking to ignore. To give voices to the traditionally silent players of our past, history has become super-segmented. Many black historians, women's historians, and immigration historians have overlooked how their subjects connect to each other. The goal of women's history was to give voice to all women, but often it has only given attention to selected racial or economic groups of women. When the interpretation of history becomes so narrow, the ability to find what makes us, as Hoosiers or Americans, similar to each other disappears.

By narrowly defining clubwomen and by viewing them only in the context of their own racial or ethnic groups, it becomes impossible to see that these women all spoke in public, maintained a predictable cycle of events, created their own meeting spaces, and developed a shared sense of female consciousness within their respective groups. And without viewing the totality of what being a *clubwoman* meant, we fail to



recognize that these women, in their own unique ways, demonstrated the power of gender consciousness. They laid the foundations for later feminist ideologies and demonstrated the power of collective action. As Paula Baker contends, women, including clubwomen, redefined traditional politics by their “formal and informal actions” and affected the course of future government policies.<sup>3</sup> The clubwomen in this study made tangible differences within their communities and in the process helped to change America.

By the 1920s, Victorian values were fading and women no longer viewed an active club life as one of the best means of personal fulfillment. Yet because these women had gathered in the public sphere and had “gotten up a discussion” on literature, race issues, and ethnic celebrations, they helped reshape the definition of a “proper woman.” They challenged each other and society to think of them as more than mothers and vessels of domesticity. Although the conservative natures of these clubwomen did not inspire them to challenge how society defined gender roles for women, they nonetheless helped redefine basic conceptions regarding womanhood and influenced the world women live in today. Their existence was truly a “worthwhile one.”

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<sup>3</sup> Paula Baker, “The Domestication of Politics: Women and American Political Society, 1780-1920,” *American Historical Review* 89 (June 1984): 622.

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## **CURRICULUM VITAE**

**Erin K. Kelley**

### **EDUCATION**

**Indiana University, Indianapolis, Indiana (8/99 – 5/03)**

- Master of Arts in Public History

**Ball State University, Muncie, Indiana (8/93 – 5/97)**

- Bachelor of Science in History and Sociology

### **EMPLOYMENT HISTORY**

**Indiana Medical History Museum, Indianapolis, Indiana (11/02 – Present)**  
**Education Director**

- Market educational programs to schools and coordinate school group tours
- Develop museum educational programs and corresponding lesson plans
- Recruit new volunteers and help manage volunteer program
- Write grant applications
- Research and develop public programs and exhibits
- Conduct off-site museum presentations

**Indiana State Museum, Indianapolis, Indiana (8/02 – 10/02)**  
**Historic Education Specialist/Museum Presenter**

- Facilitated school workshops
- Hosted the “Naturalist Lab” and stationed assorted Gallery Carts
- Assisted volunteers and staff during “Family Discovery Days”

**Charles River Labs/Genetic Models, Inc., Indianapolis, Indiana (7/99 – 7/02)**  
**Administrative & Sales Coordinator**

**First Call Temporary & Professional Services, Indianapolis, Indiana**  
**Employment Coordinator (12/97 – 6/99)**

**Ball State University London Centre, London, England**  
**Resident Assistant (9/97 – 12/97)**

### **INTERNSHIP EXPERIENCE**

**Conner Prairie Living History Museum (Summer Internship, 6/02 – 7/02)**  
**Collections Division**

- Assisted the Curator by researching exterior and interior components of an 1886 farmhouse
- Aided the Conservation Technician in the cleaning and care of artifacts
- Worked with the Registrar in accessioning and cataloging newly obtained artifacts

### **Indiana Medical History Museum (8/01 – 5/02)**

- Guided school and group tours
- Wrote an interpretive plan to help guide the museum in its future endeavors
- Developed a volunteer strategy for new docents
- Assisted the Executive Director with grant writing
- Managed the research activities of new volunteers
- Designed pre- and post-tour packets and survey evaluation forms for teachers
- Wrote a “user-friendly” PastPerfect software instruction guide for collection-focused data entry

### **Indiana Historical Society, Indianapolis, Indiana (8/00 – 8/01)**

#### **Education and Public Programming Division**

- Coordinated educational and public programming events
- Researched, designed, and implemented week-long educational series for fourth grade classes on “Pioneer Indiana”
- Planned and implemented “Story Hour” lessons and activities for pre-school children
- Wrote and presented introductions for weekly film series

### **AWARDS and HONORS**

- 2001 Mary O’Brien Gibson Endowed Intern Scholarship Recipient
- Ball State University Summa Cum Laude Honors College graduate
- Ball State University Presidential Scholarship Recipient, 1993-97
- Phi Society (Ball State’s equivalent to Phi Beta Kappa), inducted Spring 1996

### **PAPERS AND PRESENTATIONS**

- “Transcendent Spaces.” Public talk at the Indiana Historical Society’s Kickoff Program for Indianapolis’s civic event, *Spirit & Place*, November 6, 2001.
- “‘Get Up a Discussion’: The Women of the Athenaeum Damenverein, 1875-1920.” Paper presented at the Indiana Association of Historians Annual Conference, March 2, 2002.
- “From Scientific Laboratories to Indiana History: Making the Connection.” Session presentation at the National Council for the Social Studies Regional Conference, April 19, 2002.