

THE WOMAN CITIZENS LEAGUE OF COLORADO

The National League of Women Voters.

When the 1919 call to convention of the National American Woman Suffrage Association went out to members to meet in St. Louis in February, the Nineteenth Amendment had been ratified by only twenty-eight states, but the call contained this optimistic challenge:¹³

As a fitting memorial to a half century of progress, the association invites the women voters of the fifteen full suffrage states to attend this anniversary and there to join their forces in a League of Women Voters, one of whose objects shall be to speed the suffrage campaign in our own and other countries.

In her address to the convention delegates, NAWSA President Carrie Chapman Catt launched the organization that was to become the National League of Women Voters, "free from religious or racial bias, to work to liberate women from legal inequities, to present a program of nonpartisan political education, and to continue to conduct schools for citizenship." The National League of Women Voters at that time was made up of the organizations in the states where woman suffrage had already been attained. Organization was completed a year later, at the February 15, 1920, convention in Chicago. With Maud Wood Park as president, the organization began with one of Catt's famous plans — five years to be devoted to training all women to use their right to vote.

Mabel Costigan, the suffrage activist from Denver, was an exceptionally able and forceful woman. One of the founders of the National League of Women Voters, she helped establish the organization's goals in economic issues. As early as its 1925 convention, the National League of Women Voters, addressed economics with extensive debate on the issue of the Muscle Shoals project, which included the production of nitrogen for defense and farming needs as well as hydroelectric power. The League supported a bill which created a government corporation (The Tennessee Valley Authority) to manage both the dam and the fertilizer operation. Mabel Costigan spoke effectively to persuade the delegates to vote support for the bill as the best alternative available.¹⁴

The Woman Citizens League.

Although we have no report of the 1928 meeting, we can imagine the group of prominent Denver women having tea at the Costigan home in Denver's Park Hill. Mabel had just moved back from Washington, and had been commissioned by Belle Sherwin, the president of the National League of Women Voters, with organizing the League in Colorado.

Geraldine Knight (later Mrs. Milton Green) was the National League Organizational Secretary who helped with the organization plans. As reported in the notes of the meeting, these women attended this first meeting and served on the organization committee with Mrs. Costigan: Mrs. Ben Cherrington, Mrs. Harry K. Runnette, Anna G. McClintock, Mrs. James Grafton Rogers, Mrs. Hugh McLean, Georgia Nelson, Mrs. Robert Stearns, Mrs. James Ray Arneill, Mrs. Harriette F. Dunklee, Mrs. Platt Lawton, and Josephine

¹³ Helen Hill Miller. **Carrie Chapman Catt: The Power of an Idea** (NY: Carrie Chapman Catt Memorial Fund, Inc., 1958), p. 15.

¹⁴ Louise M. Young, **Op. cit.**

Roche. After Miss Knight explained the national organizing plan, a board was selected and plans were discussed for establishing the League in Denver, Boulder, Greeley, and Colorado Springs.

The first president was Mabel Costigan, with Edith Cherrington as vice president; Mrs. Runnette, secretary; Amy Stearns, treasurer; Mrs. Arneill, membership chair; and Mrs. Edward H. Kirchner, publications chair. Mrs. Colin Goodykoontz represented Boulder; Mrs. W. Lewis Abbott, Colorado Springs; and Mrs. A. L. Mumper, Greeley. Several women were wives of professors at the universities and colleges. Some were faculty members themselves. Others were teachers in the schools of the communities or business women. Most of them were married. They were women who knew how to organize and manage a group. The idea was emphasized that the League would prosper where there were colleges.

Enthusiastic support of prominent women in Colorado launched the League in good order except for the problem of the name. The Colorado Equal Suffrage Association had incorporated as the Colorado League of Women Voters soon after ratification of the Nineteenth Amendment. That group had never been active and had not affiliated with the National League of Women Voters, but the charter members refused to give up the name.

Since the new organization had to choose a different name, the board made the decision to incorporate under the name *Woman Citizens League of Colorado*. On March 4, 1929, the incorporation papers were signed by Mrs. Milton D. Green, Louise B. Burns, and Mrs. Edward P. Costigan. Appended to the incorporation papers filed in the office of the secretary of state for the Woman Citizens League, is a list of the first twenty-seven board members: from Denver – Mmes. Edward P. Costigan, Ben Cherrington, James Ray Arneill, Harry K. Runnette, Hugh McLean, Robert L. Stearns, Harriette F. Dunklee, Platt Lawton, Edward H. Kirchner, Phillip York, Edward V. Dunklee, J. B. Stott, and Milton D. Green; Misses Lucy I. Harrington, Anna McClintock, Josephine Roche, Helen Bell, Elizabeth Fackt, Ruth Vincent, and S. Dorothy Johns; and Dr. Elsie Seelye Pratt; from Boulder – Mrs. James Grafton Rogers, Mrs. C. B. Goodykoontz, and Miss Antoinette Biglow; from Colorado Springs – Mrs. F. Lewis Abbott and Mrs. S. W. Schaeffer; and from Greeley – Mrs. Charles Southard.

A report filed by Treasurer Amy P. Stearns showed bank balances of \$67.15 on November 11, 1929, \$50.15 on January 1, 1930, and \$65.00 on February 1, 1930. Membership dues were \$2.00. The amount received for dues recorded on these reports was \$235, indicating that a number of women had joined the new League.

The first years — 1929–1934.

Minutes of the earliest meetings of the League are missing from the files, but those beginning with April 16, 1930, demonstrate that the organization was thriving with leadership by prominent Colorado women. Characteristic of those times, women were identified by the status of their husbands in many cases, and they were called "Mrs." or "Miss" in minutes written by hand. The meeting format included a board meeting in the morning, followed by luncheon and a speaker. The first meetings were held at the YWCA Tea Room at 16th Avenue and Tremont Street in Denver.

Probably, one of the first "actions" taken by the organization was a letter, dated November 8, 1929, in which the WCLC asked Senator Charles W. Waterman to support legislation for: (1) maternity and infancy health and welfare, (2) government operation of the Muscle Shoals power project, and (3) the "lame duck amendment" which shortened the time between election and beginning of the term of the president and vice president by changing the date of the presidential inauguration from March 4 to January 20. The minutes of May 26 reported that a "noncommittal" reply had been received from Senator Waterman.

At the April 16, 1930, board meeting, President Mabel Costigan appointed the following committee chairs: Finance – Mrs. J. Alvin Schrepferman; Membership - Helen Bell; Publicity – Mrs. John M. Steele and

Annah G. Pettee; Efficiency in Government - Mrs. H. F. Dunklee; Child Welfare - Mrs. Milton D. Green; Education - Mrs. Everett S. Shaw; Living Costs - Mrs. C. B. Goodykoontz; Social Hygiene - Ruth Vincent; Women in Industry - Mrs. Charles M. Kassler; Legal Status of Women - Mrs. Lewis Thomas; International Cooperation to Prevent War - Elizabeth Fackl. The 3rd Vice President, Mrs. Foster, was in charge of membership development. The board endorsed the nomination of Sarah Platt Decker, a leader in the Federation of Women's Clubs, for a National Honor Roll. The names of the committees indicate that the interests of the organization were very broad and had progressed far beyond Carrie Chapman Catt's original *Plan for Work* — training women how to use the ballot.

Dr. Edith Bramhall gave an eloquent luncheon speech on the need for a constitutional convention. The board decided that the next meeting would continue the subject with a debate between Dr. Bramhall and Morrison Shafroth. A discussion of how the League should be financed was led by Geraldine Green, who reported that Colorado's annual pledge to the national organization was \$120. Treasurer Mrs. E. V. Dunklee reported that the checking account balance on April 1, 1930, was \$69.75. The consensus was that increasing membership would improve the money situation.

A candidates meeting presented by the Colorado Federation of Women's Clubs in October 1930, offered an opportunity for a League committee to interview the candidates on the issues supported by the League. Mrs. Green and Mrs. Dunklee had previously been appointed to work with the Civic League to plan a candidates meeting.

By September 1930, eighty women had joined the WCLC. Small groups were organized to study "Federal Relations with Colorado Schools," "Problems of the Pacific," and "Foreign Relations." There was no set program agenda at that time, and local Leagues were free to choose subjects of their own interest. Board meeting format continued the same, with the meeting followed by lunch and a speaker on such topics as "Unemployment," "Refinancing Education in Colorado," "Colorado Taxation," and "Colorado and the Changing World." The broad interests of the members is evident in the choice of topics to be explored by the League.

After Edward Costigan was elected to the U. S. Senate in November of 1930, Mabel prepared to move to Washington again. She was honored at a meeting with 96 WCLC members who heard her speak on "*Women's Stake in Government.*"

At the December board meeting, a telegram was sent to Sen. Lawrence Phipps, commending his "promise of sympathetic consideration of the U. S. entrance into the World Court." Membership had reached 103 at this time. The treasurer reported a bank balance of \$126.24 and a budget of \$319 was adopted for the coming year. Radio station KOA, contacted by Mrs. Louesa Brownfield in 1931, began the broadcast of League voters service and issue information that continued for several years.

An Annual Meeting was held at the Brown Palace Hotel on March 24, 1931. Mrs. George Hoxie, Director of the Sixth Region of NLWV, and Elizabeth Longan, Regional Secretary, were guests of honor. Membership was reported to be 96, and an annual budget of \$394 was adopted. Program for the year, presented by Mary Ruffner, included adequate appropriation for maternity and infancy welfare work in Colorado, county health, national tariff, and cooperative marketing. The nominations report included: President Mrs. Geraldine Green, 2nd Vice President Eleanor Dennison, 3rd Vice President Mrs. A. D. Mumper, 4th Vice President Mabel Costigan, Corresponding Secretary Mary Ruffner, and Directors Mrs. Charles Watson, Hester Smith, and Mrs. Platt Lawton.

State Senator C. Edgar Kettering and Representative S. Arthur Henry spoke on "Problems Facing Colorado Legislators." Mrs. Hoxie discussed the standards of the White House Conference on Child Welfare. A birthday cake, with two candles representing the two years of growth of the League in Colorado, was presented to Mabel Costigan.

First local Leagues organized.

On March 26, 1931, the WCLC board recognized the Women Citizens League of Boulder. With 23 paid members, the first local League had been organized with Mrs. Colin Goodykoontz as president. A petition for a local League in Greeley, with 33 paid members, was also approved. Mary Ruffner was leading a Denver group studying the question of jury service for women in Colorado. This was the beginning of a League study that was to continue for another fourteen years when a change in the Constitution finally was adopted by a vote of the people. Other study committees were chaired by Mrs. Arthur Cross, Mrs. Ralph Burgess, Ethel Clark, and Ruth Lloyd. The League continued to sponsor a weekly radio program where issues were discussed.

The Denver Women Citizens League, separate from the state board, was approved on February 16, 1932, with Mary Ruffner as president. Regional NLWV Secretary Elizabeth Longan attended the Annual Meeting on March 18, 1932, and led a discussion of "What Makes a Successful League Program?"

"Hard times" and the League.

The effects of the Great Depression were being felt by the Women Citizens League. In June of 1932, the state board approved a reduction in the dues for Greeley members to \$1.00 per year — provided they paid their quota of fifty cents per member to the state organization. At the same time, Mrs. Mumper, from Greeley, resigned from the state board. The WCLC itself also was having financial difficulties. With a balance on hand of only \$5.04, there was a \$12 deficit for the \$100 annual quota to NUWV. That amount was contributed by Mrs. Arneill. A letter from National LWV President Belle Sherwin described the NLWV's financial problems and stated that the services of a regional secretary of the League would be discontinued.

A committee was appointed to "look into the financial responsibilities of the State League." The members remained enthusiastic and optimistic. The Treasurer's report of January 27, 1933, showed a balance on hand of \$12.70 in a fund to pay the \$55.00 pledge to national. Membership dues in the amount of \$33 was expected by February 1, and \$10 had been contributed by local Leagues. The report on March 8 stated that all bills had been paid, and there was a checking account balance of \$1.19.

Action by the League.

Efforts to secure for the organization the name, "The Colorado Branch of the National League of Women Voters," were increased, and a committee was appointed to contact the Secretary of State. Elizabeth Blanc reported for the committee that no progress had been made by January 1933. Mabel Costigan then was asked to write to Mrs. Alva Adams (whose husband was a former governor and the U.S. senator) to use what influence she could with the Secretary of State in order to further the matter, but even this plan was not successful.

With June Schrepferman as president, League action in 1933 included support for an efficient public welfare department, and a "short ballot" amendment. The League opposed limitation of mill levy on general property to 25 mills. League interests included conditions of schools, public welfare, unemployment, labor laws for women, county health departments, minimum wages and hours, and child welfare.

Communications from the national organization had an important place in the business of the WCLC. A request that two Colorado delegates attend the national Council, where leaders from all states would get together in 1933 was received and the state president urged any member who planned to be in the east at that time to represent Colorado at Council. Travel was not easy in those Depression days!

The Colorado League also was asked to join the national LWV in applying for funds from the Bonfils Foundation for an adult education project. The committee on International Cooperation recommended that the Colorado League "approve the action of the national board of incorporating for study and support, measures limiting the manufacture and shipment of armaments," and that the Colorado League vote to support various "proposals for the revision of the war debts in the interests of world peace." The National League of Women Voters supported the Colorado League's decision to oppose legislation to prohibit married women from holding any state, county or city office. Many people in Colorado were unemployed at that time and the legislation was designed to protect the jobs of the men.

In 1933, a committee met with National LWV board member Mrs. George Hoxie and drafted a program-making policy to provide that state program would be based on the national program and would be adopted biennially by the delegates to the state convention. The plan was designed to achieve greater uniformity in studies of Leagues throughout the organization.

State Board and local Leagues work together.

In 1934, Bertha Perry, a Denver attorney, succeeded June Schrepferman as WCLC president. The Boulder and Denver Leagues were in good shape, but plans were made to reorganize the Leagues in Greeley and in Colorado Springs. The State Board's budget for 1933-34 was \$140, with income of \$100 from the Denver League, \$30 from Boulder, and other contributions amounting to \$10. Requests to organize local Leagues had been received from women in Grand Junction and Fort Morgan.

A Joint Annual Meeting of the Denver and Colorado Women Citizens Leagues was held in June, 1934, at the Argonaut Hotel (Colfax & Grant, Denver). A printed invitation sent to League members by Denver President Edith H. Cherrington, said: "Because the need for a well-informed and clear-thinking citizenry is more urgent than ever before, because the League's program to help create such a citizenry must be well-planned and wisely directed; because of the value of an annual inventory of our past and future policies and activities as an organization, I urge you to participate in the Annual Meeting of the Denver Woman Citizens League on April 16, 1935." Although the Denver League was now separate from the Colorado state board, the meeting's agenda concerned the program for all members in the state.

The delegates adopted a proposed budget of \$305 and a study agenda that included "the effect of labor conditions on the woman worker's health, safety, and economic security." Those elected to the state board were: Vice Presidents Ruth Lloyd, Ethel Covington, Mrs. Schallenberger, Mrs. Lewis Abbott; Ingla Martin, Treasurer; Katharine Williams, Recording Secretary; Directors Mrs. James Rae Arneill and Mrs. Amos Sudler. At the dinner, Dr. Lewis Abbott spoke on "The National Recovery Program as it Relates to the League."

League members had been studying efficiency in government, including budgetary control in state government, cost and financing of government, federal aid to the state, and reorganization of counties. The Boulder League was commended for its outstanding work in the program to provide school lunches for the children of the unemployed, and for monitoring the child labor provisions. Denver members also had studied child labor and had provided statistics on children who worked in the sugar beet fields. The WCLC had distributed information opposing a 25 mill limit because it gave only 10 mills to schools. League members supported school bond proposals.

By the fall of 1934, the attention of WCLC members was concentrated on ways of increasing the membership of the organization. Constance Roach, National Secretary for Organization of the National LWV, met with the League board and urged that they ask prospective members to assist in a project by supporting the League. She emphasized that League is not an organization for entertainment, but guidance is provided for program leadership; and stated that Leagues are most effective when program "department heads" are active. The League was growing slowly in spite of hard times. A group of women in Grand

Junction applied for organization of a League, but the plans did not succeed. Courses in fundamentals of citizenship were planned in both Denver and Boulder.

Issues and publications.

The Colorado income tax, public welfare legislation, and support for the World Court were issues supported by the WCLC in 1935, when 75 members met for the Annual Meeting. Denver League's membership was 160. Elizabeth Blanc was elected state president, with board members: Bertha Perry, Edith Cherrington, Alice Van Diest, Mabel Costigan, Mrs. H. Allen Beck, Helen Burke, Mildred Biddick, Katherine Williams, Ethel Covington, Mrs. Amos Sudler, Mrs. James Rae Arneill, Mrs. Clafin, and Mrs. Shallenbarger. Mary Ruffner was president of the Denver League and Winifred Arthur was president of the Boulder League.

Mrs. G. Shepard Barnum, Regional Director of the National LWV, was the luncheon speaker on the topic "*The League Goes Forward.*" She stressed the need for expansion and urged that the League adopt studies that lead to action that would attract prospective members. League members at that time showed their interest in consumer economics by adopting studies of increasing purchasing power, tariff adjustments, trade agreements, and public utilities. Plans were made to organize the League in Lamar, where Alice Van Diest had given membership information to Alice Bannister and a visit had been made to Mrs. James Buchanan. Elizabeth Blanc and other board members had met with women in Pueblo, where 27 joined the WCL and elected as their president Mrs. C. W. Porter. Interest in reorganizing had been shown by women in Greeley, and a trip was made to organize a League in Grand Junction.

The WCLC was still unsuccessful in obtaining the name "League of Women Voters." A committee to work on this problem included: Misses Blanc, Ruffner, Biddick, Williams, and Burke; and Mmes. Beck, Cherrington, Green, and Perry. Mrs. Arneill had visited with Mrs. Anna Scott (one of the group that had incorporated under the name) four times without persuading those women to give up the name. Elizabeth Blanc, who was to devote countless time to this issue, volunteered to talk with the Secretary of State again and ask for his help.

The finances of the WCLC improved in 1936 when the first ballot issue pamphlet was published at a cost of \$56.17 for 10,000. At the November board meeting, the treasurer reported a balance on hand of \$89.95, with a profit of \$157.67 on the **Ballot Issue** pamphlet. The board approved payment of three cents per mile or bus fare for board members attending out-of-town meetings.

Another Colorado League publication was **A Picture Book of Taxes in Colorado**. The 3,000 copies of this 16-page book had cost \$117.52 to print in 1937, and it was sold for five cents each or \$4.50 per hundred. This "little brown book" that explained state taxes received much praise and sold well. Free copies were delivered to legislators, the state executive council, and others who had assisted with the project.

League members continued their interest in diverse topics as they observed activities during the legislative session, and lobbied for income tax, child welfare, and civil service legislation. At the 1937 Annual Meeting, Senator Eudochia Bell Smith (a Denver League member) and Representative Florence Kramer addressed the topic "The Legislature from a Woman's Viewpoint."

Minutes of meetings in early 1938 report League opposition to the proposed Equal Rights Amendment because it was believed to conflict with League positions on the improvement of working conditions for women. This opinion was supported by studies of the Women's Bureau of the Department of Labor which was working for protective legislation for working women.¹⁵ The minutes of meeting do not report any action by the WCLC to oppose the ERA.

¹⁵ Burns, Peltason, & Cronin. **Government by the People**, pp. 185–187.

League activities expand.

With President Grace Shaw presiding at the 1938 Annual Meeting and, with 46 delegates present, reports were optimistic. A new League was organized with 28 members meeting twice a month to study county government in Colorado Springs. Pueblo members were studying county government. Boulder President Winifred Arthur reported 22 active members, emphasizing studies of foreign policy and local government. Denver's President Mary Ruffner reported regular weekly meetings, marked activity in local affairs, 170 members, good financial condition, and a steady growth toward a position of leadership in the community. The report on organization was less encouraging. WCLC had been unsuccessful in organizing new Leagues in Sterling, Greeley, Fort Collins, and the Arkansas Valley. The Pueblo League was ready to disband. A "campus League," sponsored by Georgiana Benjamin of the Boulder League, had been formed by women students at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

WCLC was publishing **The Colorado Woman Voter** on a quarterly basis and distributing it to several hundred non-members as well as to League members. Legislative bulletins were issued on income tax, civil service, child adoption and foster homes, state library, child labor law, minimum wage for women workers, and neutrality legislation. A bibliography of educational materials and a digest of laws affecting women in Colorado were published. Legislative sessions were observed by a committee of twelve League members who met at weekly luncheons where discussions were held with the three women appointed to review important bills and lobby for the League. Newspaper clippings in the League scrapbooks show good publicity for League meetings.

A comprehensive program adopted for 1938-39 consisted of reorganization of state government, merit system, fair minimum wage for women workers, social security law and federal-state employment services, state library system, and jury service for women. Publication of the ballot issues pamphlet continued. Colorado adoption laws were researched and recommendations for improvement were made by the members who found the circumstances of orphaned and abandoned children to be extremely undesirable. The state board included: President Mary Ruffner, Edith Fidler, Elisa Palladino, Mildred Biddick, Bertha Perry, Helen Cool, Isabelle Mayhoffer, Winifred Arthur, Grace Carrier, Elizabeth Blanc, Edith Cherrington, Ethel Covington, and Mmes. Arthur Cross, E. V. Dunklee, Clarence Herbst, R. W. Rutledge, J. K. Richardson, L. Allen Beck, and Platt Lawton. Local League presidents who reported at the convention were Mary Ruffner, Denver; Winifred Arthur, Boulder; Alice Van Diest, Colorado Springs; and Mrs. Roy Ortner, Pueblo.

At the state convention held in May 1939, delegates adopted an ambitious program. They voted to continue watching legislation on the old age pension system, fair minimum wage for women, social security, and jury service for women. This part of the League program was known as the "Continuing Responsibilities". New studies, called "Current Agenda," were planned on the topics of legislation for consumer protection, low-cost housing, discrimination against married women, a plan for the reorganization of the state government, a merit system, and a state library. This was the beginning of the League's "CRs" and "CAs." It had been ten years of accomplishment for the members of the Women Citizens League of Colorado.

League opens first state office.

As early as 1936, the League also felt the need for some kind of office space and arranged to have a book case for League materials in a room at the downtown YWCA. Mrs. Gorsuch cataloged the publications and the League gave a \$5.00 donation to the YWCA. When Mary Ruffner was elected state president in 1938, the budget was increased to \$750, which allowed for rental of an office at the YWCA to be shared with the Denver League. Mrs. Harold Benjamin of Boulder donated the proceeds from a lecture she gave, and the Boulder League contributed an additional \$34 to be used in furnishing the office.



Left to right: Bertha Perry, Gov. Edwin Johnson, Hazel Costello, Mrs. R.C. Jacobson
[mid-1930s]