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James Anthony Schnur

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LEADING THE WAY ALONG TAMPA BAY: OVER SEVENTY-FIVE YEARS
OF SERVICE AT THE ST. PETERSBURG WOMAN'S CLUB

Jim Schnur

A lecture given at 1:00 p.m. on Friday, 12 May 1995, at the historic St. Petersburg Woman's Club in commemoration of the centennial of the Florida Federation of Woman's Clubs.

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**Leading the Way Along Tampa Bay: Over Seventy-Five Years
of Service at the St. Petersburg Woman's Club**

by Jim Schnur

A lecture given at 1:00 p.m. on Friday, 12 May 1995, at the St. Petersburg Woman's Club in commemoration of the centennial of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs.

As many of you know, 1995 marks a special year for all Floridians. On March 3, 1845, Florida entered the Union as the 27th state. As our beloved Florida celebrates her Sesquicentennial, we have also assembled here today to recognize another important anniversary: the centennial of the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs. I consider it a true honor to stand before you, and am humbled at the prospect of retelling a history that many of you have contributed to... in such great measure.

I am pleased to say that I am not the first person to stand before the membership of the St. Petersburg Woman's Club at a pivotal point in its history or at a centennial celebration. Nearly 50 years ago, former-Governor and then-Senatorial candidate Spessard L. Holland spoke at this Club on the topic "Prospects of Our Post-War Period." While he accurately predicted the economic and demographic boom that followed World War II, he also talked about the importance of Florida's history in that year, the centennial of statehood. At the time, wartime austerity measures prevented extravagant celebrations of this important Florida milestone and, similar to the scant funding provided by our lawmakers for the present Sesquicentennial, celebrations had to originate at the local group or club level. I am glad to be a part

of the Florida Federation's centennial at today's tea.

While many historians, sociologists, and feminist scholars have examined the women's club movement at the national level or in northern cities, few researchers have given proper attention to such associations at the local level in southern communities. A notable exception is the recent work written by Jessie Hamm Meyer, "Leading the Way: A Century of Service." While I must confess that I have not had an opportunity to read this book from cover to cover, I am very impressed with the effort she put forth in writing this book and assembling pictures of the various clubhouses throughout our state. She sets a good example for me to follow.

But... please remember that I do not view my remarks as definitive statements or facts cast in impregnable concrete about the St. Petersburg Woman's Club; instead they are building blocks that should lay the groundwork for further research. Due to the limited amount of time available for my lecture, I have chosen to limit my discussion to the earlier years of the Club's history, a period which may seem remote to us but is nevertheless very important.

Women's Clubs truly came of age in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, such organizations often formed coffee klatches that paid little attention to global matters, instead concerning themselves with informal discussions of literary and arts topics. As clubwomen gained a greater awareness of social issues--such as injustices committed against women and children laborers during the

industrialization of the late nineteenth century--they joined their distinct clubs into larger federations and searched for solutions to society's ills. By the 1890s, the General Federation of Women's Clubs held biennial meetings and planned for the creation of state federations that would allow diverse clubs to unite in a common purpose.

In Florida, such a bond was forged in Green Cove Springs in early 1895 with the establishment of a Florida Federation with the following statement of purpose: "The Florida Federation of Women's Clubs has one object, namely; to bring the women's clubs into acquaintance and mutual helpfulness. Any club applying for membership must be free from sectarian or political bias, and must express the spirit of progress on broad and humane lines."

When Nancy Esterly moved from Evanston, Illinois, to St. Petersburg, Florida, she encountered a city that is quite different than the Sunshine City of today. Less than 5,000 residents called our city their permanent home in 1913, and citizens on the Pinellas peninsula had only recently secured independence from Hillsborough County and its then-distant county seat, Tampa. As a former president of a Federated Woman's Club in Evanston, she sought to organize a local Club, but met with some resistance.

St. Petersburg already had a Woman's Town Improvement Association (WTIA), founded in 1888 and in existence until 1934, as well as chapters of the United Daughters of the Confederacy, Ladies of the Grand Army of the Republic, and Daughters of the American Revolution. With the WTIA serving as a blanket social and civic

service organization during the early years of the city--playing an instrumental role in the development of Williams Park, the erection of sidewalks, and the beginning of the annual Washington's birthday parade--city patriarchs wondered if St. Petersburg needed another woman's organization.

Esterly prevailed, however, and the St. Petersburg Woman's Club was formed on 7 February 1913, with less than 15 charter members. When members met at the First Baptist Church, they enjoyed music and partook in intellectual discussions. After completing a constitution and accompanying by-laws, the Club joined the Florida Federation of Women's Clubs. Actually, your Club celebrates three birthdays: its creation and affiliation with the Florida Federation in 1913, federation with the General Federation in 1917, and incorporation in 1924. Its important to note that incorporation paved the way for the construction of the clubhouse in 1929.

Ladies in the Club quickly assumed an active role in civic affairs. They served as advocates for laws to protect women and children and to provide for women's suffrage, and kept in touch with lawmakers in Tallahassee, who met in biennial--rather than annual--legislative sessions until the 1960s. Many women were attracted to the diverse and varied activities at the Club, and at the end of the Club's first year membership had increased to over 75 members. An important tradition began with the tithing of a portion of the Club's income to charitable and civic causes.

America's entry into World War I paved the way for women's

organizations across the nation to assume a larger role in their communities. It was during this period that the Club began its longstanding and close relationship with the Red Cross, and indeed the Club played an important part in the formation of a local chapter. Concern for Belgian Relief, hospital service, and other efforts on behalf of the war were coupled with a spirit of service for the community, as clubwomen advocated improvements in the treatment of tuberculosis patients, the inadequate network of welfare for poor children and needy families, and the unsanitary conditions allowed to persist in St. Petersburg's African-American community.

Many barriers fell during the 1920s. As women entered the voting booth for the first time, they became more involved in political affairs and calls for educational reform and proper funding for social and cultural services. Through the strengthening bonds of the Federation, women in different areas of the state and nation could keep abreast of activities in other regions. While members of the Pinellas County Federation worked on park improvement projects, they also planned the construction of our beautiful clubhouse here on Snell Isle, with a Building Fund started in 1922.

A lack of educational outlets for women prompted the creation of a "Women's University" of sorts. During the 1920s--indeed until after World War II had ended--white women in Florida had few options if they sought to continue their education beyond high school. Frugal state authorities supported only three public

institutions: the University of Florida (all male), Florida A&M College for Negroes (all black), and the Florida State College for Women in Tallahassee. While the State College would later become the comprehensive Florida State University, at the time it resembled a small normal school with few degree programs. And, few members of the Club had the luxury of time or resources to matriculate in classes 250 miles away. As a solution, the Club sponsored a series of study courses. For example, during the 1925-1926 season, ladies met in the downtown Presbyterian church's Sunday School building and took classes on subjects like World Travel, French, Nature Study, Parliamentary Law, and Current Literature. The opening of St. Petersburg Junior College in the late 1920s did provide an additional outlet for intellectual growth.

Despite a downturn in the local economy by 1926, the Club continued to grow during the late-1920s. In March 1927, the Florida Federation held its 32d annual convention in St. Petersburg, with our clubwomen providing camaraderie to ladies from throughout the state. The Finance and Building Committee met at the house of Mrs. Gandy, wife of builder and developer George S. Gandy, whose namesake bridge was the first to span across Tampa Bay and bring Tampa and St. Petersburg closer. The committee voted to borrow \$15,000 dollars towards the construction of a clubhouse. At first, Club members--who met in a number of churches and homes--seemed reluctant to establish a permanent home at the western edge of Snell Isle, then connected to northeast St. Petersburg by a narrow

wooden bridge. While many women wanted their Club to sit in downtown St. Petersburg, no single piece of property in that area was deemed suitable. In 1927, C. Perry Snell, the developer who transformed much of northeast St. Petersburg into a snazzy residential area, donated land for the clubhouse on Snell Isle. It was a mutually beneficial relationship: The Club occupied a premiere spot on the site of a future Snell subdivision; and Snell hoped that the clubwomen might encourage their husbands to purchase residences near the structure, which would fill Snell's pockets.

As membership increased, so did the resources available in the Building Fund. With well over 800 members by 1925, the St. Petersburg Woman's Club was at the top of the Florida Federation. According to the 1963 Golden Anniversary program, the present clubhouse was constructed at a cost of approximately \$35,000 and dedicated in November 1929. With a beautiful edifice on what was still a vacant island, the women in the Club successfully lobbied for the construction of a sturdy concrete bridge across Coffee Pot Bayou. Aerial photographs of Snell Isle during the 1930s show the Club as one of few buildings on a still largely vacant peninsula.

The reason for this: The Great Depression had hit Florida earlier than the rest of the nation. As the boom went bust in the mid-1920s, service organizations had to assume advocacy roles to encourage the federal government--especially during the New Deal years after FDR's election--to encourage federal support of worthwhile endeavors that could no longer count on funding from

scarce corporate or state coffers. The economic depression led to a significant decline in memberships, when paid membership plummeted from approximately 600 to under 150. It continued to decline, reaching barely 80 members by 1933. But economic malaise did not end the Club's emphasis on service: Club activities continued and the Junior Woman's Club was established despite the bleak financial conditions of the period.

Social activism also continued. When Club members heard a 1931 rumor that the Pinellas County Juvenile Court might be abolished to save a few dollars, they lobbied not only to preserve this institution, but also to assure that sufficient resources were available for it to maintain professional standards. During the same year, the membership passed a resolution calling for lawmakers to create a full-time Pinellas County Board of Health to meet the needs of families on our peninsula. Ladies in the Club also joined members at sister institutions throughout Florida as they corresponded with legislators and governors to assure that schools received attention during budgetary discussions in Tallahassee. Membership rebounded by the late 1930s and Town Hall lectures replaced the earlier study sessions.

The unequal status of women in America often was a subject of discussion. For example, a March 1939 program described the irony of Florida's system of laws that placed married women "legally in a class with lunatics and children." At that time, when a woman entered into a marriage, she forfeited many of her rights of managing her property. Stands on social issues such as this often

carried a price: During the 1920s, support by the General Federation of Women's Clubs for maternity welfare and children's rights led to charges that the parent institution was a Communist organization under Russian influence. Such red-baiting did not prevent federated club from taking strong stands on important issues. Club members continually monitored the status of women and, during the throes of World War II, even put forth a resolution in 1943 that called for lawmakers to approve a constitutional amendment guaranteeing equal status for men and women.

Two burnings took place at the Club in 1940. On 18 April 1940, members celebrated the ceremonial burning of the building's mortgage. A month later, in May, fire ravaged part of the Club House's interior, but fortunately left the pictures of past presidents untouched. The blaze began in the custodian's quarters under construction above the kitchen. Due to the creative labors and energies of clubwomen, repairs were made over the summer and the building was restored and remodeled by the opening of fall season.

The Second World War forever changed the face of Florida, and activities on the distant European and Asian continents certainly touched the lives of women at the Club. Eight months to the day before the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the chair of the Sewing Group of Bundles for Britain reported that her committee donated well over 250 garments, towels, and blankets, and raised over \$100...a formidable feat given that the Bundles for Britain sewing group had been in existence less than 3 months prior to the report. In the

spring of 1941, nearly 650 women belonged to the Club.

After America entered the war, Club officers dedicated the sewing room for sewing Red Cross garments one half day each week. They collected books for redistribution to soldiers at army camps and purchased a substantial amount of war bonds. Showing their patriotic fervor, members of the Juniors actively engaged in Red Cross and defense work on the home-front as well.

As Allied troops crossed Europe and America turned the tide in the Pacific Theatre, Club members began to discuss America's global responsibilities after the war. With the motto "Forward Together to Victory," a November 1944 tea opened the season with the theme "Tomorrow's World--Our Responsibility." The Club's Town Hall lecture series included programs with titles such as "Post-War Problems," "The Balkans--Test Tube of Peace Plans," and "The Big Four Control the World's Future."

After the war, clubwomen continued to express an ever-growing interest in community service. The membership, for example, religiously sent donations during the Holiday Season to organizations such as the YWCA, YMCA, , Red Cross, community chest, Salvation Army, Florence Crittendon home, and the Happy Workers' Kindergarten, and monitored the educational needs of children in the state year-round.

Indeed, during the post-war years, members devoted a great deal of time to conquering the problems confronting American youth. In late 1947, the Department of Youth Conservation met with city officials and fellow Club officers to begin an important civic

welfare project: the creation of a children's playground area in a park planned for the African-American community. At this time, Jim Crow laws created segregated and inferior facilities for persons of color. During the discussion of the Wildwood Park project, one officer reported that "We hear much talk about the 'Youth Problem', but until we furnish adequate and appropriate outlets for [our] growing youth, we cannot solve the 'Youth Problem'. We hear much talk of 'One World', but until we do away with prejudice [and] intolerance, and practice cooperation, there is no solution to our common problems." The motion was carried in December 1947.

In addition to the playground at Wildwood, clubwomen became involved in other philanthropic activities that benefitted St. Petersburg's black community. They donated money for an eye and ear clinic, as well as funds for the purchase of high school busses and to further the work of the county supervisor for Negro schools. While educational institutions were supposed to be separate and EQUAL, the Pinellas County Board of Public Instruction followed the rest of the region in providing inferior resources for its black pupils. Club members on Snell Isle certainly did their part to address these glaring inequities.

In the spring of 1948, over 500 members of the Florida Federation gathered at St. Petersburg for a three-day convention, the 53rd annual meeting of the Federation. With the theme "Assembly of Women of the Americas," those in attendance were welcomed to a lavish banquet at the Soreno Hotel, a grand slate of programs, and a talk by then-Governor Millard F. Caldwell, as well as a variety

of activities at our Club. During this assembly, Junior clubs established their headquarters at the Pennsylvania Hotel and participated in many of the programs at the Soreno. The front page of the 21 April 1948 St. Petersburg Times welcomed visiting clubwomen delegates to have a good time and to enjoy the sunshine.

The 1950s and 1960s brought many changes to the Club. A variety of repairs and modifications were made to the clubhouse, including a new air conditioning system that certainly made those long, hot Florida summers much more tolerable. Membership returned to a level not witnessed since the 1920s as nearly 800 clubwomen were involved in activities at the Snell Isle center. Of course, charity and civic work continued in the local community, as ladies inaugurated a Community Clothes Closet, offered educational assistance to Seminole Indian children, provided medicine to indigent children, purchased a vehicle for a local rehabilitation center, and set aside finds for scholarships at St. Petersburg Junior College.

Floridians closely followed the 1960 presidential election. While Governor LeRoy Collins--Florida's favorite son and premiere statesman--served as permanent chair at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, Club member Clare Brown Williams Shank--Assistant Chair of the Republican National Committee--welcomed Alaska and Hawaii to the Union in a nationally-televised ceremony during the second session of the Republican National Convention in Chicago. In 1958, Shank had been asked by President Eisenhower to serve in this capacity, as well as advise and direct women's

activities nationwide, a post she held until 1964. She had also offered a speech at the GFWC Washington convention on "The Role of Women in Public Affairs." After encouraging women to work within the party system to promote good government, she defined the prerequisites necessary for a successful female politician: "Looks like a girl, Acts like a lady, Talks like a man, Works like a DOG." Also of note, in early 1961, our Club sought to raise \$1,200 to cover the costs of a day's broadcasting over "Radio Free Europe" to then-Communist Czechoslovakia. Club members contacted a variety of community services organizations to seek co-sponsorships. The 1960s also marked a great era for the improvement of the clubhouse and its grounds, but, as my allotted time runs short, I think I will table discussion of more recent events for a possible future lecture.

Look at the front page of your program. It includes the title "A Century of Achievement." In the last few minutes, I have attempted to paint a portrait of the achievement and service of members of the St. Petersburg Woman's Club during the earlier years of its history. Much has happened in recent years, from the designation of this wonderful building as a historic landmark to your continued service in a variety of community events. While I have tried to touch on many facets of your Club, I have only scratched the surface. It would take much further research--and endless hours of reflection--to offer a comprehensive history of the Club.

As primary players in the history of this Club, this might be

your opportunity to contribute to its rich history. Perhaps longtime members might be interested in offering oral histories or working to conserve and build the Club's archives. I hope everyone leaves today's program with a sense of pride for the important role your Club has playing in the history of our community. May the St. Petersburg Woman's Club continue to "lead the way" for generations that follow. Thank you very much.

Sources Consulted

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