

# The Women's Movement in the West:

A Tribute To 19th Century Club Women



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by

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## INTRODUCTION

When Stephen Sondheim wrote his 1970 musical, *COMPANY*, he included a sardonic look at twentieth century women who have too much money, too much time and - quite obviously - too much to drink at their ritual lunches, yet every opportunity for career and intellectual advancement were open to them.<sup>1</sup> One wonders how Sondheim's ladies-who-lunch ever evolved from their counterparts of one hundred plus years ago, when virtually all avenues of intellectual and personal fulfillment were closed to women.<sup>2</sup>

It is these earlier women who have attracted my attention. What did these women do with themselves? When the prairie was plowed, the towns settled, the children raised and the husband off to work, how did married women - who, by society's edict, were not allowed to labor outside the home<sup>3</sup> - keep their sanity? We have no reason to believe women a hundred years ago had lower I.Q.'s, less curiosity or less ambition than do today's women. Yet few women were permitted to pursue college degrees, so how did they satisfy their intellectual curiosity?

They formed clubs<sup>4</sup> - all kinds of clubs. Culture clubs, travel clubs, literary

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Sondheim. "The Ladies Who Lunch" from *COMPANY*. (New York, 1970).

<sup>2</sup> Mrs. J.C. Croly. The History of the Woman's Club Movement in America. (New York, 1898). p. 12 .

<sup>3</sup> Carl N. Degler. At Odds. Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present. (New York, 1980). pp. 375, 383-388.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 376.

societies, church guilds, temperance unions, ladies aid societies. A founder of one of the first women's clubs described its genesis in New York City in 1868 thus:

"Many women... wished for a more intimate companionship with women, that is, with those whose deeper natures had been roused to activity, who had been seized by the divine spirit of inquiry and aspiration, who were interested in the thought and progress of the age, and in what other women were thinking and doing."<sup>5</sup>

I will start with an assumption: that women's clubs answered a need shared by a significant number of women which, from the dearth of such clubs today, apparently no longer exists. What then, were those needs and what role did the clubs play in answering them?

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<sup>5</sup> Croly, p. 16.



## THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT IN THE WEST: A TRIBUTE TO 19th CENTURY CLUB WOMEN

by

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The modern women's movement, with the help of the news media, has done an excellent job of educating the general public as to the traditional restrictions placed on women in the workplace, in the courts, and in social affairs. These restrictions stemmed from the elevated position of women in society which was both ennobling and enslaving. European travelers in 19th century America often noted the extreme politeness extended toward all females, as opposed to the Old World distinction between "women" and "ladies".<sup>6</sup> However, the price for this relative equality among the various classes of women was, for many, an idle life in a gilded cage. Single women, while enduring the stigma of a socially unacceptable marital status<sup>7</sup> were at least allowed to make a modest living as teachers, laundresses, servants, clerks, dressmakers or milliners.<sup>8</sup> The list was generally limited, however, to those fields which prepared young women for

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<sup>6</sup> Andrew Sinclair. The Emancipation of the American Woman.(New York, 1924). p. 119.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 169  
Degler, pp. 152-253.

<sup>8</sup> Degler, p. 377.  
T.A. Larson. "Women's Role in the American West", from MONTANA, The Magazine of Western History. (1974) pp. 5 & 6.

their intended station in life - that of wife and mother.<sup>9</sup>

(Dressmakers and milliners were actually on the borderline of respectability. One of my great-grandmothers was once forced by her family to turn down an opportunity to become a milliner on the Alaskan frontier because of its perceived scandalous associations.)

Married women, however, were excluded from all commercial endeavors outside the home unless so compelled by straightened circumstances. Such a situation brought with it the appropriate Christian sympathies of the community but also an inevitable loss of status.<sup>10</sup> There was a reason for this, of course. The early settlement of Colonial America required a partnership of husband and wife to accomplish the enormous task. With the successful establishment of a Colonial economy and subsequent industrialization, it became a point of honor when the wife in a family could pursue activities which were purely ornamental. "Instead of contributing to the family economy, women sought leisure for the cultivation of their femininity, in order to prove that, as wealthy individuals, they could afford to be unproductive."<sup>11</sup>

It was not, however, women who originated this notion. Andrew Sinclair in The

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<sup>9</sup> Degler, p. 306.  
Sinclair, pp. 10 & 169.  
Mary P. Ryan. Womanhood in America From Colonial Times to the Present. (New York, 1975) p. 145.

Keith E. Melder, Beginnings of Sisterhood. The American Woman's Rights Movement. 1800-1850. (New York, 1977) p. 3.

<sup>10</sup> Degler, p. 374.

<sup>11</sup> Melder, p. 7.

Emancipation of the American Woman states:

"The curious fact about the Victorian lady was that her husband was prepared to work himself almost to death to support her. It was a point of pride to him that his womenfolk should not have to work outside the home, even if they wanted to. Status in society depended on idle women. In the immigrant and fluid society of North and West, this proof of social position was important for the rising man."<sup>12</sup>

Although the term, "Women's Movement" today contains images of bra-burning and conjures up uneasy feelings of emasculation, it actually covers a broad movement which began with the emergence of women as individuals in American society.

In the American colonies the only acceptable activity for women outside the home was church work. Probably because of a lack of male volunteers, women were actually encouraged to participate in ladies aid societies, Bible groups, altar societies and the like.<sup>13</sup> According to Carl Degler in his book, At Odds. Women and the Family in America from the Revolution to the Present

"The benevolent groups also provided outlets for women's talents and interests that the home could not always satisfy. The members of the society made social contacts with other women and developed peer associations that provided a sense of identity in a world in which women's place depended almost entirely upon her connection with a man."<sup>14</sup>

A natural outgrowth of these groups were the moral crusades waged later in the 19th century against slavery, prostitution, alcohol, political corruption, unsanitary

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<sup>12</sup> Sinclair, pp.116-117.

<sup>13</sup> Croly, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup> Degler, p. 301.

conditions, etc.<sup>15</sup> These reform movements were for the most part well within the prescribed women's sphere of moral superiority and guardian of the nation's virtue, and were therefore considered socially acceptable pastimes for the "weaker sex". Moreover it was believed that "because [women] were more sheltered, more protected from the world's vices and passions, [they] owed a solemn duty to protect their families from evil."<sup>16</sup>

The fact that women had the time and inclination to meet at all is a result of the developing middle class in 19th century America. Increased immigration brought the availability of cheap domestic labor to help housewives with their never-ending chores, and the development of labor-saving devices for the home gave middle-class women leisure time never before possible.<sup>17</sup> By the same token it was the seemingly limitless stream of immigrants who filled the increasing factory jobs, making it both unnecessary and undesirable for middle-class women to do so.<sup>18</sup>

There is a wealth of published material on the history of the women's movement in America. Women's activities were well-organized and well-documented in the eastern centers of population and provide an excellent resource for the student.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid., p. 305.  
Sinclair, p. 39.

<sup>16</sup> Melder, p. 8.

<sup>17</sup> Degler, pp. 324-325.  
Sinclair, p. 319.  
Lorine Pruette, Ph.D. Women and Leisure. A Study of Social Waste. (New York, 1924) p. 6.

<sup>18</sup> Ryan, p. 197.

Very little, however, has been written about the women's movement in the West. The larger studies on the national movement imply that the development of issues and activities was more or less simultaneous across the continent, yet it doesn't take a Ph.D. to figure out that the abolition of slavery was not exactly a burning issue in the Black Hills of 1861! And it is obvious that the arrival of the Fremont, Elkhorn, and Missouri Valley in 1886<sup>19</sup> or the tremendous fear of an Indian uprising during the 1890 Ghost Dance revival were far more pressing issues for Rapid Citians of both sexes than the vote for women. Except for a paragraph here and there, the only material available about women of the West is about Calamity Jane or Poker Alice, or one of the few courageous females who ran the gauntlet of male repression to achieve status in the professional or business world. The amount of ink expended on frontier ruffians and obvious exceptions is, in fact, depressing. Books such as Dee Brown's *The Gentle Tamers* and the Time-Life Old West Series 'The Women' devote their entireties to detailing the exploits and accomplishments of outstanding western women while ignoring the majority who abided within society's strictures. Without a doubt the Sally-sit-by-the-fires were less interesting, but nevertheless, a study of women in the West is invalid without them. The women who broke the mold were exceptional exactly because they were so few. Their examples therefore shed little light on the role of women as a whole in the society of the West.

The disproportionate coverage given to these inevitable exceptions leads the

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<sup>19</sup> Leonard Jennewein and Jane Boorman, Dakota Panorama (Sioux Falls, 1961) p. 261.

average reader to believe that society's rules were loosened in the West, thus easing the way for women's emergence. In fact, the exact opposite is true. In the small towns on the American frontier, where many other social conventions tumbled, the role of women grew perversely narrower.<sup>20</sup>

Although opportunities for men were outstanding in a West where a man's origins and very name were not questioned too closely, women's sphere was reduced even further by her isolation, increased duties (shoulder-to-shoulder behind the plow) and fewer employment opportunities outside the home.<sup>21</sup>

It was woman's mission "to carry the shrine of civilization into the wilderness"<sup>22</sup> but she was ill-equipped for such solemn responsibility and was chastised by society if she made any effort to improve her qualifications. One Western woman wrote in 1898 that women meeting for an exchange of ideas without regard to charitable purpose were suspect: "There was little sympathy with organizations of women not expressly religious, charitable, or intended to promote charitable objects".<sup>23</sup>

The West lacked both the industrialization and the accouterments of society which the eastern half of the nation had developed over 200 years of settlement. The

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<sup>20</sup> Barbara Maver Wertheimer, We Were There - The Story of Working Women in America (New York, 1977), p. 249.

Joan Swallow Reiter, The Women (New York, 1978), p. 161. Ryan, pp. 140-141.

Larson, p. 9.

Sinclair, pp. 204-205.

<sup>21</sup> Larson, p. 7.

<sup>22</sup> William W. Fowler, Woman on the American Frontier (Hartford, 1878), p. 508.

eastern women's clubs therefore developed sooner and became reform-minded before Dakota Territory was even created.

Women in the eastern cities had passed through the phases of social gatherings for the purpose of self-improvement, moral crusades against demon rum, prostitution and slavery, and were well into political activism by the time the first settlers arrived in the Black Hills. The ladies of Dakota Territory, while not necessarily ignorant of the activities of their sisters "back home", were nevertheless preoccupied with providing for the necessities of life in a newly established town or ranch, and by the time they began to organize socially, they inevitably followed the same logical progression of their eastern counterparts. Thus it was that in 1900 Black Hills women were still in the self-improvement stage when women's groups in New York and Cincinnati were agitating for better working conditions for factory women and the right to vote. No doubt the first women's clubs in the West started with nothing more formal than two acquaintances meeting for an afternoon of sewing. The need for female companionship on the male-dominated frontier was probably as strong an incentive as the need for intellectual stimulation at first, but as more women arrived, social intercourse took a back seat to self-improvement.<sup>24</sup>

The 1904 Black Hills Illustrated devotes an entire page to "Women's Literary and Social Clubs of the Black Hills", written by my great, great grandmother, Anna Morris

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<sup>23</sup> Reiter, p.105.

<sup>24</sup> Sinclair, p. xix.

Clark, President of the Thursday Club. She begins with an optimistic assessment of the situation in traditional Edwardian hyperbole:

"Never before in the history of the world has the great heart of woman beat more warm and generous for womankind than it does in this age. The old traditions, which commanded woman to keep silence and limited her activities to domestic life, have been banished long since by the spirit of self-culture and advancement.

"The federative idea which unites women into clubs and brings about free interchange of thought for self and mutual improvement in literary research, philanthropic work and social intercourse is sweeping over the land like a flood of sunshine, broadening education and brightening homes."<sup>25</sup>

It is a tribute to the fact that women had been shackled to their homes for so long that the *mere act of leaving the home to do something on their own* (though certainly not to work) was considered liberating and enlightened.

Grandma Clark's article echoes in both content and style the introduction to Jane Cunningham Croly's massive compendium, The History of the Women's Club Movement in America, written six years earlier in 1898:

"The Woman's Club movement represents a part of the great popular educational movement which is sweeping like a tidal wave over the country and of which chatauqua, summer schools, night schools, university extension, etc. are all manifestations. The club movement also represents the tendency to associated effort...It is in the association that the individual discovers his personality, which he contributes for the good

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<sup>25</sup> Black Hills Illustrated (Deadwood, 1904), p. 66.

of the whole."<sup>26</sup>

Following the opening flourishes in Grandma Clark's article comes a comparatively pedestrian description of women's clubs not only in Deadwood but in Lead, Rapid City, Hot Springs, Spearfish, Sturgis, Keystone, Terry and Whitewood. One wishes she had devoted less space to gushing and more to describing just what it was these ladies clubs accomplished.

The proliferation of such clubs indicates a hunger for knowledge among Black Hills women. Being a club woman was perhaps a socially acceptable way of obtaining an education which was otherwise denied to married women.<sup>27</sup> This alone is a valid reason for their existence.

In light of this evidence it is hard to swallow Carl Degler's condescending assessment of self-improvement clubs:

"...some women's clubs never rose above the level of a garden group or a loosely defined and loosely run book-reviewing meeting of middle class women who had more time than serious thought at their disposal. Other clubs were *simply educational meetings* for the members, introducing them to subjects usually believed to be beyond the province and competence of women, such as international relations, economics, or municipal corruption."<sup>28</sup>

Since Degler goes on to extol the virtues of service clubs, the implication is that

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<sup>26</sup> Croly, p. x.

<sup>27</sup> Croly, p. 118.  
Anna Garlin Spencer, Woman's Share in Social Culture (Little & Ives Co., 1912) p. 231.

<sup>28</sup> Degler, p. 325.

improving a community is worthwhile but improving a female mind is obviously a waste of time.

Many club names reflected either a total lack of imagination on the part of its membership or simply a puritan belief in forthrightness. "Woman's Club" was of course, the most commonplace, often preceded by the name of the community. Then there were names reflecting the club's meeting time or contemporary outlook: Fortnightly, Thursday Club, Monday Afternoon Club, Century Club, Current Events and Twentieth Century Club. Literary clubs were often named for authors: Dickens Club, Shakespeare Club - or terms of a literary nature: Round Table Club, Twelfth Night. A few enterprising groups selected a club name with considerable thought and research. Greek mythology was apparently much in vogue at the time many women's clubs were formed. Ionian, Amaranth, and Clio Clubs were represented in all parts of the country. Some clubs proclaimed the purpose of their groups in the title: Eugenics and Coterie; some were purely ornamental but original: Aurora Borealis Club. The Sorosis Club of New York had selected its lyrical-sounding name from a botanical dictionary without regard to its actual definition. Because of its leading role in the formation of the General Federation of Women's Clubs in 1890, Sorosis Clubs thereafter sprouted throughout the country until the name actually came to mean "woman's club".<sup>29</sup>

Besides the obvious intellectual enrichment derived from the meetings, women's clubs offered other benefits: they gave

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<sup>29</sup> William Morris (ed.) The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (Boston, 1969),

"relatively easy and exciting access to the fringes of men's sphere of activity and authority... [They also gave] women training in organization, planning, political agitation, and public speaking. Women's clubs were the first opportunity for women to forge new bonds with each other outside the traditional spheres of home and church."<sup>30</sup>

A look at the activities of a few of the Black Hills women's clubs indicates just how serious these ladies were in their endeavors.

The April 2, 1904 program for Deadwood's Women's Club included among other things a paper entitled, "The Cause and Conduct of the Pelopennisian (sic) War"<sup>31</sup> which sounds more like the subject for a master's thesis than afternoon entertainment for a group of uneducated housewives! This thirst for knowledge is evident in all the Black Hills clubs and resulted in some amazing program topics and an accumulated knowledge far beyond what their formal educations might suggest.

The Current Events Club was formed in Rapid City in 1893 and is one of the few clubs still active. The club met twice a month at which time members presented in-depth reports on a country's history, geography, literature, art, music, drama, government, customs and superstitions. Programs were selected a full year in advance, printed, and strictly adhered to (at least in the early years). According to the Rapid City JOURNAL article on the club's 90th anniversary, "Tea drinking was banned during the first meetings. Everything was strictly business - meetings were not

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p. 1233.

<sup>30</sup> Judith Papachristou, Women Together - A History in Documents of the Women's Movement in the United States, (New York, 1976), p. 125.

<sup>31</sup> Daily Poineer-Times, April 2, 1904, p. 6

considered social events."<sup>32</sup>

In 1900 members dissected the country of France in chronological order from "The Reign of Charlemagne" through "The Relation of France to the Papacy", "Chivalry" and "Rabelais", to "France in Fashion" and "Victor Hugo".<sup>33</sup>

The program booklets surviving from the Current Events Club span the years 1900-1925 and serve as excellent barometers, not only of the state of affairs in the Black Hills but of women themselves. As the war years approached scholarly research papers gave way to book reviews and readings. It is probably safe to assume that women had less time and perhaps less desire to delve into subjects in such depth. Women were moving increasingly into the marketplace and attending colleges in larger numbers during this period, thus lessening the original needs for such clubs. Whereas the early program booklets are pristine and perfectly preserved, those from the teens are heavily edited in pencil by their original owner, Mrs. J.M. Woods. Both members and topics appeared to be in a constant state of flux, no less so than woman's role at the time. The 1918-1919 program booklet, prepared while World War I raged, reflects the turmoil of the times. It was printed on cheap brown paper and, aside from the usual roster of members and club credo, contained only the following message:

"In planning for the work for the present year, the program committee has felt that the continual change of focus of public attention and the sudden rise of unforeseen events into positions of paramount importance make the preparation of a fixed, and at the same time vital,

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<sup>32</sup> Rapid City JOURNAL, December 13, 1983, p. 13.

<sup>33</sup> Current Events Club program booklet, 1900.

program an impossibility."<sup>34</sup>

By the 1920's programs had become a hodgepodge of topics lumped under an umbrella title such as "Tendencies of the Times". Incredibly, these "tendencies" did not include a single program on the landmark 19th Amendment, granting the suffrage that women's clubs had been advocating for nearly a century.

Other Black Hills women's clubs were no less ambitious in their early years but either changed their course or withered away in later years.

The Treble Clef Club of Spearfish was organized by ten women in 1907 to "study general music history". Members responded to roll call with "interesting current events in music" and at least one hour of choral practice was a regular feature of the weekly meetings. By 1914, however, the club had abandoned its original musical theme "owing to the scarcity of musical members at this time".<sup>35</sup>

Minutes indicate that club members were being exposed to other federated clubs which were studying civic improvement, the franchise, pure food laws, etc. The club became simply "the Women's Club". Within a few years its membership had increased and it was sponsoring a French War Orphan and making substantial donations to the Red Cross, Belgian Relief Fund, cemetery association, and local library. The club raised money for its charitable activities by giving dances and plays, and sponsoring chatauquas.

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<sup>34</sup> Current Events Club program booklet, 1918-1919.

<sup>35</sup> Treble Clef Club minutes, September 29, 1914, Mrs. J. Lincoln Driskill, sec.

One of the earliest women's clubs in the Black Hills was the Deadwood Round Table, organized in 1887. Among other things it was responsible for starting the Deadwood Carnegie Library and keeping its shelves stocked with a steady supply of books.<sup>36</sup> The formation of libraries was a favorite and early project of women's clubs across the country, perhaps because the avowed literary goals of so many of them required readily available research materials.<sup>37</sup>

The Thursday Club was organized in 1895 as a literary society. By 1905 the Thursday Club had developed a pattern of studying Shakespeare at the first meeting of the month and a designated country at the second - two plays and one country per year. The plays were read in their entirety, one section per meeting, with the members taking the various parts. The programs on countries were conducted very much on the same ambitious lines as the Current Events Club of Rapid City.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although the women's club movement got a late start in the Black Hills it took root quickly and firmly. Its heyday was the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the Black Hills were emerging from their gold rush mentality and struggling valiantly to present a dignified face to the world.

While the brothels and gambling dens flourished in most Black Hills communities, the club women did their best to bring culture and enlightenment to the maturing gold

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<sup>36</sup> Irene Cushman. Diary of Irene Cushman, (Deadwood, 1890-1891)

<sup>37</sup> Croly, p. 273.

camps.

The measure of their success is recorded in the newspaper reports of the day, the libraries established, the lecturers imported. Without the women's clubs, the vast majority of civic improvements implemented prior to World War I would have languished or been postponed indefinitely.

The intangible benefits of these clubs, though, may be their most lasting legacy. Individual women who needed companionship and desired intellectual stimulation emerged from their club experiences with a new awareness and self-confidence their mothers never knew. Because of great-Grandma Clark's club experiences her granddaughters (she had no daughters) were encouraged to earn college degrees and pursue fulfilling careers even after marriage.

I am the lucky heir of this chain of succession. In my own girlhood it was unusual for a mother to work, yet I myself never doubted that I would go to college and have some kind of a career in addition to being a wife and mother if I so chose. Because my great-grandmothers *had no choice*, and invented an ingenious substitute for education and a vocation, *I* had abundant choices.

So I hereby propose a toast: to the courageous women who came before -  
*HERE'S TO THE LADIES WHO LUNCH!*

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