

## The League of Women Voters Decade of the 50's

The League of Women Voters of the 1950's was considered a mature organization. Its voice was rooted in consensus ensuring that it represented a preponderance of membership opinion. The membership fluctuated between 120,000 and 150,000 with 1000 local Leagues in every state and the District of Columbia. The members participated in action-oriented studies of the issues with commitment and enthusiasm.

The Carrie Chapman Catt Memorial Fund was established to expand educational activities about democracy and citizen participation using tax-deductible contributions. The League participated in international exchanges. In 1957 the League of Women Voters - United States established the LWV Education Fund, receiving a 501(c)(3) designation from the I.R.S. The Library of Congress agreed to house the historical papers of the League. The publication of the *National Voter*, a communication channel that would reach every member was established in 1951.

The 1954 Convention members decided to rid themselves of "dead wood" from the past and supported eight continuing responsibilities and eighteen principles. One principle called for the "removal of legal and administrative discriminations against women." This would help pave the way for vigorous support for the ERA proposal passed by Congress in 1972.

The witch hunt period of the early fifties inspired the League to undertake a two-year community education program focusing on the individual liberties guaranteed by the Constitution. Next came an evaluation of the federal loyalty/security programs and ultimately a League position that strongly emphasized the protection of individual rights. In 1955 League President Percy Maxim Lee testified before Congress against Senator Joseph McCarthy's abuse of congressional investigative powers . *"I believe tolerance and respect for the opinions of others is being jeopardized by men and women whose instincts are worthily patriotic, but whose minds are apparently unwilling to accept the necessity for dissent within a democracy."*

The international heritage of the League was reflected in its consistent support of the United Nations. It supported the "Uniting for Peace" resolution of the UN and held workshops, public meetings and forums to explain the UN's role. The League supported long-term economic and technical assistance to stimulate economic growth in developing countries in hopes of shortening the gap between America and emerging nations. It supported friendly contacts with common goals to realize a vision of an international civil society. A foe of development assistance, Louisiana congressman,

Otto Passman denounced the League's position stating, "They're a fine bunch of ladies, but they don't know anything about the program...[and] would be better advised to concentrate on matters they are qualified to handle, like child-rearing."

Another League project occurred when local Leagues were encouraged to conduct surveys of the impact of trade on their local communities. Over five hundred surveys were made with more than thirty-five hundred League participants. The results agreed that economic isolation was decreasing and the idea of an expanding trade policy was attracting wider public support. Many members had been unaware of trade policies and their impact on their communities.

The League also realized the key to direct citizen participation and influence was Voters Service. The Voters Service members helped build an understanding of our representative system and showed citizens how to participate effectively. They linked candidates to issues and tried to help every voter cast an informed vote. Then as today, the citizen's informed vote is the most powerful weapon against lethargy and apathy: the two greatest enemies of democracy.

Many of these issues had their beginnings in the 40's and 50's and continued in future decades. These women had such an influence on issues and policies that impacted all levels of government in both the United States and at the international level.

By Marge Massarello, League of Women Voters Oak Park and River Forest

Thank you to...

Nancy M. Neuman, *The League of Women Voters In Perspective 1920-1995*

Kay J. Maxwell, League of Women Voters U.S., *The League of Women Voters Through the Decades*

Barbara Stuhler, *For the Public Record, A Documentary History of the League of Women Voters*

Louise M. Young, *In the Public Interest: The League of Women Voters 1920-1970*