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What Can You Do for Community Improvement?

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COMMUNITY improvement is a subject all too often neglected—and, often, the recognition for it. Such work, however, represents jobs that need to be done—frequently for the benefit of the entire community. One organization which has recognized this need and actively promoted better living and better communities is the Iowa Federated Women’s clubs.

There were 856 clubs, representing 34,000 women, active in the state in 1957. A review of the reports of their achievements for the 2-year period, June 1956 to June 1958, shows that each of the 856 groups was involved in one or more community service projects. Other organizations are active in this area, too. But, to give you a picture and idea of the kinds of things that can be accomplished by these organizations, let’s look at those undertaken by this one group.

Libraries: Iowa now has 421 local public libraries, and women’s clubs have started 87 percent of them. This accounts for a very large share of the libraries in the smaller Iowa communities. In addition to starting new libraries, the clubs have assisted with the programs of existing libraries and have taken on projects such as remodeling buildings, adding books and magazines and providing story and reading hours.

Examples of the areas of service include summer recreation programs, supplying playground equipment, help with summer swimming programs, providing band uniforms and bandshell accommodations, sponsoring youth centers and help with craft and hobby classes. One club took the lead in forming a recreation council.

School Programs: The Clinton Junior Women’s Club won national recognition for its work to help pass a school bond issue and its achievements in developing community music programs. Similar support for school bond issues was reported by three other clubs.

Five clubs carried on work for school reorganization. Other clubs sponsored career days, provided recognition for student achievement, contributed to school libraries, helped equip school kitchens and supplied other needed school equipment. Thirteen clubs mentioned contributions to student loan funds, and two clubs supported programs for exceptional children.

Work Opportunities: In one way or another, anything contributing to the development and attractiveness of a community has a bearing on its economic life and employment opportunities. Many clubs are active in this regard. An additional 12 clubs reported activities specifically related to industrial development and work opportunities for youth—securing vacation and after-school jobs for teenagers, cooperating with the local development organization, sponsoring youth guidance and counseling programs.

Handicapped and Needy Children: Over 30 clubs helped to advance programs for mentally retarded children, mainly by contributing funds, improving classrooms or providing equipment. Other clubs gave similar aid to schools for handicapped children. One club surveyed child welfare needs and contacted county officials about ways to develop programs dealing with the problems noted.

Senior Citizens and Shut-ins: Senior citizens and shut-ins received special attention from 94
women's clubs in Iowa. Some gave their attention to county homes; others reported projects of visits, gifts and services to people in nursing homes and rest homes.

Mental Health: State mental health institutes received gifts or services from 13 of the clubs. Five clubs in county seat towns worked for the establishment of mental health centers or boards.

Hospital Services: The Missouri Valley women's clubs played a major role in an educational, planning and promotional campaign which resulted in building a $450,000 community hospital. Two clubs in Elkader supported similar endeavors. Financial support and needed equipment or supplies for local hospitals were furnished by other clubs. Still others reported sewing for hospitals, visiting patients and helping with blood bank programs.

Physical Health: The Marathon Study Club persuaded federated clubs in 51 counties to join an educational campaign on multiple sclerosis and enlisted help in the cause of additional legislation for aid to the permanently and totally disabled.

Tuberculosis testing programs were sponsored by five clubs; immunization and inoculation projects, by three. Three clubs sponsored eye testing of school children, one promoted fluoridation of city water, and one helped develop a dental program in the schools. One club sponsored a health clinic and vaccinations; others helped obtain a county nurse. Additional health activities included open meetings to discuss heart disease, folding cancer dressings for home treatment and raising funds to provide heart surgery for a local child.

Safety: Additional safety signs were provided in five communities as a result of efforts by women's clubs. Five other clubs aided in establishing signal lights or stop signs at school crossings. One club promoted improved lighting in the school parking area; another, a one-way street by the school. Six clubs sponsored school patrol or traffic safety projects, including a driver-training program.

Town Appearance, Sanitation: Local park improvement was of general interest to clubs throughout the state, and several clubs undertook specific projects. Nine clubs were instrumental in developing street-marking or house-numbering programs. Other clubs started or helped develop litterbug or community cleanup campaigns. Five furnished trash containers for use in the town, and one paid for garbage disposal from a wayside park. Other projects included work with the town council for a sewer system, helping to pass a water bond issue, securing a favorable vote for cleaning up a polluted lake and helping to improve lake beach area.

City-beautiful projects, home yard improvement contests, flower planting and tree planting were sponsored by some clubs in the state. Three clubs reported landscaping projects for municipal buildings. Two clubs helped promote plantings at swimming pools, five gave attention to cemetery improvement, and one to community hospital grounds.

Community Buildings: One club reported establishing a community hall, and another remodeled an old schoolhouse into a usable community building. Four clubs in one town and one in another helped to convert old movie-houses into community buildings. One club aided in getting out the vote for a new fire station. Another worked toward a new hall to replace the old building used by the fire department and town officials. Others reported working for community centers—either for new ones or for remodeling and redecorating old ones. Clubs in a few towns also furnished equipment for or helped to remodel the town hall.

Adult Education, Fine Arts: Women's clubs have, as one of their major interests, that of advancing adult education and enjoyment in the realm of the cultural arts. Their regular meetings present many programs of this nature for their members. They also support many community activities in this area.

The Clinton Junior Federated Women's Club established and maintained a symphony orchestra, provided a scholarship for young musicians and helped to develop a community chorus concert. Three clubs in Lamoni supported a concert and lecture series. Similar work for fine arts festivals, public lectures and recitals was mentioned by other groups.

Art classes for the entire community were sponsored by one club. A Cresco club planned the organization of adult education classes. Other clubs planned family life meetings, organized "little theater" groups, presented community plays and conducted summer reading programs for people in the community.

Other Programs: The women's clubs of Iowa helped in many other ways to better their communities and the lives of their citizens. Some of the other areas of community service in which women's clubs participated are: church programs, helping newcomers, youth-serving organizations, work with community councils, Christmas programs, local and national fund-raising projects, international relations, patriotic programs, and programs dealing with government and local history.