

LEAGUE OF WOMEN VOTERS

Decatur, Illinois
January 24, 1969

Re: History of the League of Women Voters of Decatur from 1920 to 1969. Research by Geneva Barber, 1st vice-president

In 1970 the League of Women Voters of the United States will be celebrating their 50th Anniversary.

The League of Women Voters' predecessor, the American Woman Suffrage Association held its final meeting in 1919. Delegates to that meeting heard woman's suffrage champion Carrie Chapman Catt call for a "League of Women Voters" to finish the fight for enactment of the 19th Amendment and aid in reconstruction of the nation after World War I.

The National League of Women Voters was established in 1920 to study and act on governmental issues on the local, state and national level. A Macon County chapter was organized in 1920, with Metlin Craig serving as president. This chapter continued active several years, then in 1946 a new County chapter was established with Miss Blossom Redmon as the first president. Twenty-six women became charter members at that time. A few years later the group was known as the Decatur League of Women Voters.

The League of Women Voters is a non-profit, non-partisan volunteer organization. Its income is derived from dues and contributions, particularly contributions from public-spirited members of the community.

As a non-partisan organization, the League is unique in that it takes action in support of or in opposition to selected governmental issues, but not parties or candidates. However, members are encouraged to work as individuals in the political party of their choice, though board members refrain from active party work while in League office.

Women citizens of voting age who believe in representative government are eligible to join. The local membership numbers 154. All Leaguers are not experts, nor do they all think alike on issues brought before the membership.

Delegates to the national and state conventions select topics to be studied while the membership selects those on the local level. Program items are thoroughly studied in workshop sessions with the presentation of committee reports to the members on the pros and cons of the issues in discussion. Consensus is then reached by the membership and the League then works to implement its position. Local Leagues' influence is reflected on the state level by appeals from various groups for League support.

The local program adopted for 1968-1969 is the study and evaluation of the need for funds by the Decatur Human Relations Commission,

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Evaluation of the Fair Housing Ordinance in Decatur. Support for a new main library building and further study of the needs and operation of the Decatur Public Library, the support of increased funds to provide quality education and adequate space, and to study ways to improve public education in Decatur. The group will also make a study of Decatur's water resources and sewer systems, the study and evaluation of assessment practices in Macon County and support for the continuation fo Council-Manager form of government for the City of Decatur.

Some victories in which the Decatur League has shared are:

- 1) The establishment of Council-Manager form of city government (established in 1953)
- 2) The proposed Judicial Amendments passed in 1958
- 3) In 1953 the League initiated and helped to bring to a successful conclusion, a referendum on interceptor sewers.
- 4) The call for a Constitutional Convention in Illinois (passed in 1968)
- 5) The establishment of a County Health Department in 1962
- 6) In Civil Rights, the Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1967
- 7) The school building bond referendum which was passed in 1965
- 8) Backed Urban Renewal in 1965

The League has supported issues too numerous to mention.

The League takes pride in its carefully documented publications. They have many requests for unbiased materials on current problems and queries from legislators. These publications serve the dual purpose of educating both members and the public.

In 1960, the League published a Macon County Book, the first written reference book on the local governments in the county. Compiled by League members after a nine year period of research. It outlines the forms of county, township and village government. It also includes descriptions of the judicial system: the circuit court, county court and justice of the peace courts. The booklet also includes descriptions of the countys' school districts, Decatur's sanitary district and park districts. The final section of the booklet briefly explains the political party structure in Macon County.

People who want impartial information on candidates, platforms and issues know they can turn to the League of Women Voters and get it!

Voters Service, which includes the distribution of non-partisan information on candidates and issues: campaigns to encourage registration and voting: candidates meetings: courses in practical

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politics: and go-see trips to city halls and state legislatures.

The League compiled historical files (more than a ton of papers) of the League covering the period from 1920 to 1944 and gave to the Library of Congress. They are available to sociologists, historians and scholars. Federal Aid to education from the beginning was one of the issues covered by the League.