

Ann Berry

Interviewed by Mindy Greiling

1. What was your perception of League before you joined?

Before I joined, I learned about the League of Women Voters from women at my church, the White Bear Lake Unitarian Church, especially Joanne Englund. They belonged to the Shoreview League. Also, I was a Girl Scout leader and a few of us were doing government badges with the girls. Amazingly enough, most leaders knew nothing about government. The League of Women Voters helped the girls with their government badges, and I joined the League pretty soon after that. I had four daughters and the youngest was one year old, and now she's 48.

2. How did you get involved?

I joined. I went to meetings and very soon I was on a program committee. I have no idea now what the topic was, but Sue Harmon was on it, too. We had five units in League then, and the program committee had a "rep" from most units. Another early activity was we raised some hell with the school system having an outdated and tactless sex education film. We hounded the district psychologist until she got a new one.

3. What did you find most satisfying?

The women of like mind with interest in being politically active and paying attention to city and county government. Pretty soon after I joined, there was a Ramsey County level of League that met and reviewed county issues. I think it started over county charter issues. Nancy Irsfeld was involved.

I like the idea of being in a position to influence local politics actively, especially the city council and how the city is run. (Ann agreed when I said city issues have always been her bailiwick.)

4. How much has changed since you have been a member? In LWV? In the country/culture?

Women have gone to work, including married women with children. And it's not just that they have less time. I look at my daughters. One has been active in political campaigns in Seattle but not the League. They all are doing stuff League has promoted, but you can't do everything. One daughter works over seventy hours a week, and I think it's the same with all my daughters.

The ERA didn't get passed and it doesn't matter so much now, but it would be nice.

5. What was important to women about LWV at the time you joined? What is most important today?

Grown ups talking about public policy issues all the way from local to international. There was a lot of talk about the United Nations at one time in League. Not just women talking about recipes, when their husband is coming home, or what he does or doesn't do.

6. Have you observed change in public attitudes to LWV?

Even though League members are a smaller portion of the public, there is a greater awareness of our existence, despite the Roseville Review only publicizing our issues if they know they will be controversial. We are better known and are trusted to run good candidates meetings. We're respected by the city council, where there used to be some hostility. We did butt in a lot, but we got what we wanted, too. If people don't like us, they still respect us. I think we're justifiably respected.

7. How was LWV important to the community through the years?

(see chronology list for interviewee to scan for choices)

I wasn't living in Roseville yet for the parkland lobbying, but that was one of the most wonderful things League did. There was some resentment around the city about that money afterwards, and the mayor who promoted it was unseated at the next election.

A lesser known issue was lobbying the council to limit the amount of time people sit on Roseville volunteer commissions. Although many other cities don't have that, Roseville has practiced that ever since we pushed for it. Now no one even remembers where it came from. Before this change, Roseville had a planning commission chair who had served for 25 years. He and Mayor Cedarholm had a pact where just they decided who to appoint to planning commission and then who to run for council after that. The bulk of planning commissioners were men. They had total control over this city. So much changed after that, and it works. League did that.

We also urged hiring a city planner. That was also big, but that was more public and recognized than the commission term change.

8. Is there a particular episode or event that stands out in your memory?

I served two terms on the Roseville Planning Commission, nine years on the Human Rights Commission, and on the steering committee of the last big city long range planning committee. I also served on the hiring committee for the last city manager. I went to almost all the city council meetings when I was on the planning commission.

I got started watching the city council through our neighborhood watchdog group where about 40 people dogged developer plans for our area. My neighborhood city interest overlapped with my League involvement, but the League had more influence and a broader interest and was more official. Sometimes I wore my League button and sometimes I didn't depending on the agenda and what I was watching. (League observers wear a round League button to identify themselves. They used to be green and now they are blue.)

We Leaguers made quite a big dent in city emergency medical services and in the fire department as well, after study and action. We still have to always remain vigilant about those.

Also reestablishing the Human Rights Commission when Gale Linebarger was mayor. It had been allowed to fizzle because they wanted enforcement power and the council wouldn't give it to them nor would the Minnesota Department of Human Rights. Two black people served on it - probably the only two black people in the city at the time. So it disappeared for about three years. Linebarger was very agreeable and friendly with the League. We lobbied him and the council members. They just needed some push. The Girl Scout Area Council also got involved in the reactivation effort. I was on that board and knew June Demos (later a Roseville mayor) because she was my daughter's Girl Scout leader. June influenced the Republicans in the city, including Linebarger. After the HRC was back, the Girl Scouts and the League both put my name up to be a commissioner. I served with other League members, including Hortense O'Neill and Carolyn Cushing and Dave Hall, Gerogeann's husband.

While I was on the HRC, we noticed that models in the catalogues for Penneys and Sears were all white. When I lived in Baltimore before coming to Roseville, the faculty women (Ann's husband Jim was on the faculty at Johns Hopkins University) sent their credit cards back to department stores over an issue, so we tried it in Roseville, too. Many, many League members - and others we could gather, including Jessie Rose, a black woman who lived in Roseville - took our credit cards and catalogues to Penneys and Sears stores at HarMar turned them in and said we wouldn't be charging any merchandise there until they added black models to their catalogues. I remember (League member) Florence Isaacs was so proud and happy, leaning over clutching her catalogue. She got such a kick out of it and was so cute. We made a big scene and had quite the parade. It was lots of fun. The clerks were startled. There were at least one hundred of us. We also set up little classes for informal modeling schools at Unitarian

churches so the stores couldn't say there weren't any black models. I was the dietician for the classes in case there was a model who was a little overweight. A year later, both companies had both black and Asian models in their catalogues. They had never done that before. It was pretty obvious we had an immediate impact. They have done that ever since. When I was in Penney's recently, there were several groups of Somali women being graciously served as they shopped happily. I complimented a staff person about this, who blushed, and thought, "Well, good for Penney's."

Also, when I was on the HRC, in pairs of two, we visited every single realty agency in Roseville and every rental apartment building and made very clear what the housing laws were at that time. We gave them copies of the laws. There was nothing subtle about us. We got quiet receptions. One reason I was especially interested in fair housing in Roseville was because around that time, through my husband who was on the school board at the time, I became aware of a school district administrator who was black and was turned away from even renting in Roseville, even though his wife was white. He ended up in Maplewood instead. The League was heavily involved in affordable housing and I think we made a dent there, too. We were all pretty devoted activists. I had worked on the housing issue in Baltimore before we came to Roseville in 1961. Baltimore realtors were red lining. It was bad and ultimately the battle was lost. Our old neighborhood is solidly black. I thought, well, after Baltimore I can certainly stand up and speak in this little dinky town. I had a deep seated need to promote equal opportunity in housing. It was deeply ingrained in my psyche. There were over 700 names on petitions opposing affordable housing in Roseville when the League got involved. There was universal opposition. People said "those people" and didn't even say negroes. Once in a while someone did say niggers. We presented ourselves as a more reasonable and compassionate approach. I remember the pastor at Centennial Methodist Church, whose wife was a league member, supported the affordable housing the council was considering that would be located near the church. His board of directors pushed him out of the church. It was very awkward after that. Dear God in heaven and we're a "Christian nation."

The housing issue went to the Planning Commission, which had no legal ground to vote it down, and the Metropolitan Council was promoting affordable housing. Finally it got passed, but it took a long time. There was even still opposition on the city council when Calibre Ridge was built years later on Rice Street north of Highway 36. I was on the Planning Commission then so I got to be on the committee screening the first residents. I watched it carefully and supported the project. I took it as my own little responsibility to promote it and give accurate information since one city council member was saying there were many police calls and drugs there, which wasn't true.

9. Describe the most memorable person/people you have been involved with.

Carolyn Cushing and Georgeann Hall have been the pillars and backbones of the League for a long time, especially when things got wobbly. Shirley Bradway has also been a consistent person, but in less conspicuous ways and for less time due to her work and caring for her ill husband.

10. What is the lasting importance of this organization (if any)?

The only good friends I have who are still living are League members, except for one neighbor.

League has made it easier for me to be aware of state, national and international issues. I didn't have any trouble with local issues, she smiled. We've been involved in voting rights, human rights, international relations, women's rights, racial integration in public schools, affordable housing.

11. What has surprised you about League?

It's startling that for all the common focus and agreement we share on issues that we have such an enormous range of backgrounds and personalities and how tolerant we are of crazy little old ladies.