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IN THE BEGINNING

“There is no doubt in our minds that it does make a difference that there is a League of Women Voters in our town.”

In 1953, the Village of Roseville had been incorporated for only five years. The population was growing quickly as families began building houses and watching development filling the area. A small group of women contacted the state headquarters of the League of Women Voters about starting a Roseville League. We do not know what moved them to do so. We are only told “. . . these members felt strongly that the local situation was worthy of their attention, and that they could better serve their community through the organization of a Roseville League.”

With the aid of Miss Hope Washburn, the famous organizer*, and members of the St. Paul League, they learned what would be required. The organizational meeting was held June 3, 1953 at the Lexington School. Officers were elected*, and budget and by-laws were adopted by the “Provisional League.”

The new members became familiar with League terminology --”Portfolios”, “Current Agenda” and “Continuing Responsibilities”-- and regulations, including the importance of maintaining the non-partisan policy of the League. They also began to plan for study and action on all three levels of League activity: not just for the local community, but also with state and national issues.

The League was a very formal organization, with a complex, multi-step system for selecting program areas and reaching positions. Once a topic was selected, screened, and agreed to, committees of volunteers began research. From interviews with experts, literature searches, pro and con views, the committees would write, edit, and re-write for balance and accuracy the material to be shared with all the members. Then a consensus would be developed that would form a final position.

Just handling the paper work was a major time commitment. Copies of newsletters, board minutes, and annual reports were mailed to both state and national headquarters regularly. Attendance was expected at workshops, conventions, and briefing meetings. There were joint voter service ventures. Discussion guides, background material, and report forms were sent in bulk. There was a publications catalog for material to be distributed to the public. Each member of the board received information and suggestions from their counterpart on the state level.

All newly organized Leagues were required to complete an extensive study of their community: government, history, education, and activities. Many interviews later, the information was compiled in booklet form and made available to the residents (for 25 cents a copy.) During "Roseville Week" in 1954, 1000 copies of this first publication were distributed to wide acclaim.

Roseville members were invited to participate in state activities right away. They jumped right in, getting together with members from Falcon Heights and Arden Hills to sponsor a public meeting with Congressman Eugene McCarthy, who spoke on "Taxes, Congress, and You."

They held a candidates' meeting for county commissioners in September and an informational meeting on sewers and drainage in October. They sponsored a speech by Orville Peterson, attorney with the League of Minnesota Municipalities, on "Forms of Village Government." They held a finance drive and received donations of \$653. They earned money (\$1 an hour) demonstrating voting machines for the public. They published a monthly newsletter for members, "The Village Voter". They increased their membership to 83 the first year and to 182 by the third annual meeting. They won an award from the state LWV for their work as a provisional League on a state campaign for an amendment revising the MN Constitution,

With the recommendation of Miss Washburn, the League of Women Voters of the United States (LWVUS) congratulated the members for having completed the requirements of the provisional period and formally recognized them as a local League. They were now authorized to select special local concerns for study and action in the name of the League.

The first program chosen was a study of the forms of government for "villages". This was a very controversial topic. The League's preferred choice, Plan B, was finally put in place in 1964. They did affect other important changes, such as getting term limits for Council and commission positions. The League began producing a weekly column, "The League Spotlight" for the local newspaper. A League observer reported on Council meetings for The Rose Tribune. Later there was a League "editorial" produced with the help of Falcon Heights, Shoreview, and Arden Hills members in the newspaper, North Suburban Life. They provided workshops on voting and government for the Girl Scouts (and recruited Girl Scout leaders as members.) As they looked at planning and zoning, they began lobbying for the advantages of a comprehensive plan and a budget for parks and recreation. League members did not just voice their opinions, but offered help--working on study committees and planning groups for all village efforts. They worked on a cooperative survey of Ramsey County with other members and published Ramsey County Profile in March 1956.

The president of the new League attended the National Convention in 1958 where she heard Dr. Henry Kissinger of Harvard give the keynote address on "Nuclear Weapons and Foreign Policy." When she reported on the survey of members who attended,* the Roseville League was inspired to do their own.

The 1957 survey showed the average age of Roseville members was 34, most had attended college, 15 were business school graduates; only 7 were employed full time, 13 part-time, but experiences had included 42 different jobs, including guard, fashion model, social worker, commercial artist, window trimmer, nurse, dancing teacher, biochemist, stewardess, and one woman, now home with three children under five, who had been a foreign affairs analyst!

The new League continued to press for a comprehensive plan and a professional planner. They suggested that land at Hamline and 36 would be a fine place for a "civic center". (Years later, when concern for needed facilities arose, some remembered this with regret.) They pressed the Village Council to appropriate funds for parkland acquisition. A \$650,000 bond issue was passed by the voters.

In the Sixties

The Leaguers studied health ordinances and saw the appointment of a citizens Committee on Environmental Sanitation. The result was restaurant inspection, grocery and meat store inspection, and ordinances about refuse disposal. The League felt entitled to credit as they had raised the topic and kept it in view. The study of Metropolitan government was added to their responsibilities as CMAL (Council of Metropolitan Area Leagues) formed. The tradition of "VIP" meetings began with a luncheon with village officials in 1961. A study of China(!) was added in 1966 to the LWVUS program. That led to a position to end the opposition to admitting China to the U.N.

As part of League support for the UN, members provided scholarships and then accompanied High School students to the local UN Rally programs for many years. The League also at least once organized and prepared an International Buffet Supper at Fairview Junior High that included a booklet with all the recipes.

The National League convention was in Minneapolis in 1962. Major studies included trade expansion, water pollution control, and extending the vote to residents of Washington, D.C. (It was a Minnesota congressman who argued that residents could just move if they really wanted to vote.) Locally, concern over civil rights was growing. National program worked on equal opportunity in education and employment. There was growing interest in environmental problems and pollution. Locally, concern over civil rights was growing. A North Suburban Committee on Civil Rights was organized with League members involved

The nation rocked with racial violence and was stunned by assassinations of three major national figures: President Kennedy in 1963, and then Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King, Jr. The war in Vietnam grew and a draft lottery was instituted. The League was continued working on equal rights and trying to involve more voters in problem solving. Providing housing opportunities for all turned out to be the sticking point in the suburbs. Where was low income housing to be built? Who would live there?

In the Seventies

1970 was declared “the year of the voter” at the national convention. A year later the voting age was lowered to 18, when the 26th amendment was ratified. In Roseville the voters were revolting. There were bitter controversies over plans to build apartments and townhouses where there was space reserved for subsidized citizens. There were firmly held beliefs that renters were somehow not the right kind of people. Neighbors flocked to Planning Commission meetings and angrily resisted change. League representatives upheld positions on equal opportunity in housing for all income levels. The Human Rights Commission was reactivated by the Council at the urging of the League. Three members (and a member’s husband) were nominated and appointed.

The need for a new village hall became more obvious. A first attempt to get voter agreement failed, defeated 6 to 1 in 1972. Then the League joined with a group of community leaders organizing a campaign for support. The League provided much of the energy, taking over the educational part, distributing flyers and organizing neighborhood meetings in homes, using slides to show the problems. In 1975 the \$850,000 bond issue vote was 2 to 1 in favor. Other local League concerns were emergency medical services and establishing bike trails.

At the state convention in 1972, delegates changed policy to use “voting” names instead of their married names. A survey that year of women who had run for office in MN showed 80% were present or former LWV members.

The national convention voted to support the ERA and everyone prepared for a long campaign. In 1974, male members were given full voting rights (they had been treated like non-citizens--participating members who were not allowed to vote) but the organization name remained unchanged. In Minnesota, state League publications for the first time began listing the names of researchers, writers, and editors responsible. A cookbook, *The People’s Choice*, was produced as a fund-raiser.

The State League had a big presence at the State Fair in 1972, with two booths, one with WCCO and another with the Secretary of State. The new state program was a study of juvenile justice. In Roseville, this focus ended up resulting in a youth counseling agency for the school districts and then the establishment of a Youth Service Bureau--the roots of Northeast Youth and Family Services, supported by all area governments, as well as with private donations. Environmental concern meant continued work for the establishment of bike trails, while a committee of Ramsey County League members won a conservation award for pushing the establishment of the Rice Creek Watershed.

As League members began paying more attention to county government, they became interested in some apparent problem areas. Petitions were circulated and presented to the County Board, requesting a charter study commission. The eventual result was a reorganization plan creating the position that became County Manager, to whom most administrative functions were delegated.

The national League sponsored the first presidential debates since 1960 after a nationwide drive urging candidates to participate. They won an Emmy for “outstanding achievement in broadcasting.”

In the Eighties

As the League had been recommending, the Roseville City Council entered into an agreement for the provision of emergency medical services in 1980. The success of bike trails led to a more general interest in transportation and support for non-motorized pathways. Recognizing a popular idea, Roseville began building them.

There was distress over the failure of the necessary ratification of the ERA, but the League national president said, “We will turn our frustration and anger over the denial of ratification into determined efforts to achieve ERA’s goals through other means.” There was satisfaction in the “Motor Voter” Law* and the Voting Rights Act and seeing the first woman running as a candidate for Vice President of the US and the first woman appointed to the Supreme Court.

The state League evaluated correction facilities--there was one for women in Roseville--and a women’s prison was built. Most impressive achievement during the 80s was the establishment of a Court of Appeals in Minnesota. The Chief Justice of the state Supreme Court credited the League with this major change. Leagues throughout the state had informed their communities about the advantages of a new layer for legal activity. The League was also working on complicated national topics like Fiscal Policy and the Strategic Defense Initiative.

A period of adjustment for the League began. The 70s seemed to be the time of the vanishing volunteer. Whether it was the influence of the ERA discussions, suggestion, permission, or necessity, more women were employed. From the beginning, League units in Roseville had commonly met in churches where there were nursery facilities and a baby sitter could be hired so members with pre-school children could easily participate during the day. This particular necessity faded. Now efforts were needed to streamline League procedures and find ways to modify expectations for volunteers. The number of reports required by the state and national levels were reduced. State workshops and meetings were scheduled more carefully. There was more interest in the state program studying pay equity and job sharing laws.

The local League continued to encourage more open government. Roseville began an open appointment process for positions on the Planning Commission and other city boards. League members continued to register voters in public places like HarMar and the high school. Candidates meetings were held as usual. There was a Voter Hotline established in the state office with League volunteers to give information.

In 1983 a new, simplified method called “Concurrence” was used to adopt a long awaited position. Leagues studied and then agreed or disagreed with the consensus position of one or more state Leagues. It had been ten years since Roe v. Wade and the League was finally weighing in. Minnesota had been among the majority for years in

resisting taking a stand and adding this to the program. Roseville members felt there were already groups devoted to the topic and the League was not needed. There was also concern this would be a lose/lose study. Whatever the outcome, some members would leave in dismay. In fact, a few members did leave, but discussions were always respectful in League meetings.

At the national convention in 1984, there were members displeased with the speed and direction of change, that there was too much emphasis on action. Many local Leagues felt that their main interest was citizen participation, and that direct action or lobbying efforts were less important. A members of the Minnesota delegation said, "We are seeking a balance between those members who are ready to act with almost no background and those who would really prefer to go on studying and never act."

In Roseville, League members went on looking for places to make improvements. They did a careful study of textbooks used in the schools and reported the considerable bias they found. School officials agreed changes were needed and proceeded to put in place systems to make corrections.

In the Nineties

League members started the 90s by encouraging participation in the census. Wetlands conservation and the water supply was an ongoing concern. State League studies of mental health services led to a number of grants in the 90s to continue monitoring available services throughout Minnesota. Housing positions focused on "adequate, decent and affordable," with special attention to senior housing.

The state League began work on a study of Financing State Government (to groans from those trying to attract new members.) Members went ahead energetically, arranging interviews and public meetings with a variety of experts. Discussion guides and two handbooks explaining the economics of the state budget as clearly as possible along with League positions on taxing and spending were produced.

In 1995 enough people were worried about the state of democracy that the national League proposed focusing on "Initiative to Renew Democracy" and members agreed, but changed the title to "Making Democracy Work" at the convention. The Minnesota League was well ahead, having produced an original school curriculum, "We've Got the Power: Skills for Democracy", written and published with the help of grants and distributed to every social studies department in Minnesota. A companion publication for grade school level use, "We the People", was presented in a workshop at the national convention in Chicago.

The state League began the move to join the future by carefully approaching on-line communication. There were surveys of members, measuring the level of electronic involvement. "Technology" workshops were organized. The computer-literate members gave demonstrations to encourage the reluctant. Budget implications pushed search for

new sources of funding. The need for major renovation of the state office was recognized, and over time, established.

The high-point of the 90s was the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the League of Women Voters. A League parade float at the State Fair carried VIPs (women office-holders) and was accompanied by members in suffragette costumes. A very un-League-like, no-expense-spared gala banquet was arranged with Molly Ivins as a celebrity speaker and was attended with delight. Other activities went on as always. The established Voter Hotline before the primary election took more than 10,000 calls, including the man who wanted to know how he could use the vote of his wife, who was ill. Two members of the Roseville League were recruited to begin work on a history of the Minnesota League.

National lobbying efforts advocated for children, for health care reform, for gun control regulations, and for the Violence Against Women Act.

In Roseville, members worked to stop a move away from the long-supported Plan B form of government when a group of citizens petitioned for a charter. Several members applied for positions on the charter commission. Two were appointed, one of them as Chair, by the judge overseeing the process. When the commission took testimony, League representatives presented statements aimed at softening the more extreme proposals. Members worked to inform voters about the consequences of the changes being incorporated. Efforts were seen as successful when the proposed charter was opposed by the voters.

If this was viewed as an example of the League as vigilant and attentive over time, willing to take the long view, there was more to come. In the years ahead, a Roseville study of the volunteer fire department led to a position on the need for restructuring and finally, a new Fire Department building.

On the state and national scene, League members find it necessary to re-fight old battles, including even the basic idea that “. . .responsible government should be responsive to the will of the people. . .” and that the purpose of representative government is to “share in the solution of economic and social problems that affect the general welfare. . .” [See the Principles of the League of Women Voters]

Members really do see this simply as saving democracy.

“Let us form a League of Women Voters, so that women may use their new freedom to make their nation safer for their children and their children’s children ...What should be done, can be done, what can be done, let us do.”

Carrie Chapman Catt

