

**League of Women Voters  
Interview with Mary Duddleston by Gwen Willems**

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

A long-time League member, Mary Duddleston struck me as spunky, bright, and articulate. She joined the League of Women Voters in Owatonna, then in Madison when she and her family moved there, then in Falcon Heights. “When I moved, the first thing I would look for was the League of Women Voters,” she said. They moved to Falcon Heights in 1964, and she joined the League soon after and was very active. She told me there were 60 members in the Falcon Heights League when the city had a population of 3,000. Many of the Falcon Heights League members were faculty wives who lived in University Grove.

She said, “The first thing I asked neighbors was about the League here. The second meeting I went to, Jerry Jenkins looked at me and said ‘I understand your style’ and we were best friends forever.” Jerry Jenkins was president of the Roseville League when Mary was president of the Falcon Heights League ('76).

Mary told me, “The Falcon Heights League, at the end of the '70s, just kind of dwindled down. Women were starting to go back to work, and there was an epidemic in University Grove. So many of the faculty members were discovering their secretaries and graduate students, and divorce was rampant. So, many of the women in the League were getting divorced and going back to work themselves. That really broke our group up.”

She noted, “I went back to work myself for a while, but then I finally decided I was really missing League, so I joined the Roseville League. I've only been there five-six years, not all that long. I had a long time in between.” She worked at the University Bookstore for 14 years and jokes that the only bad thing about it was that she and her husband became very strong Gopher Basketball fans, traveling to a lot of away games.

Mary recalls efforts for park creation as one of this League's strongest activities. “We worked to support a park in Falcon Heights at Roselawn and Cleveland. It was University property. The League worked to get trees planted, and that sort of thing. That's a really nice park now.”

“We used to have interesting speakers at our annual meetings. And one year we had one of our members, Jonnie [?] Heller, speak. Her husband had been the economic advisor for President Kennedy. They had lived in Washington, and she'd say, ‘In the morning I'd be standing there in my robe and slippers and saying goodbye to my husband and here he was walking off to sit in the president's office to give him advice.’ And that was a bit of a head shaker to a wife.”

## 2. How did you get involved?

“The identity of the League was ‘Mrs.’ We had a creative group of people—one woman was a writer, another one would write lyrics. Betty Ann Jones (wife of Bob Jones) was the brains behind our skits. At the ’71 or ’72 anniversary (50<sup>th</sup>?) of the League on the state level, the Falcon Heights League had one of their presentations and my role in it was representing Gov. LeVander. I was riding a tricycle and I looked up and here was Gov. LeVander, and that was a little embarrassing! Betty Ann Jones and Jerry Jenkins would write lyrics and songs for these events. It was a lot of fun, and people enjoyed it. And we did them for our own League, too. That was a state skit that the Falcon Heights group did, I think. A lot of women from our League served on the state board. Jerry Jenkins was the prime mover and shaker.”

Mary told me that “before that, in 1968, Jerry ran for state representative from this area. At that time there was one woman in the entire state legislature. Jerry ran against Bob Bell, who was an incumbent from Roseville. He won. But it was not that skewed, as far as the vote is concerned.” When Mary found out that Jerry was going to run, she called Jerry and offered to resign from the League so she could have Jerry’s campaign sign on her lawn. Mary organized 45 coffee parties for Jerry—“because in those days women were home and that was a way to get out into the community”—and many meetings for the public and with officials. “The only real put-down incident situation we had was at Roseville, a meeting of the candidates, and the city administrator was chairing it. He stood up and he was introducing Jerry and he was very awkward and he said, ‘Well, we don’t have many of *them* running for office. They don’t like to have their seats up for grabs.’ The women in the audience just cringed, and Bob Bell, bless his heart, he cringed too, and he came over afterwards and was so apologetic for the treatment. That would be typical; he was saying something that a lot of people would be thinking in those days.” The only other woman that Mary recalls being in the Minnesota Legislature at the time (1968) was Alpha Sunde Smaby [I did a little online research and found that this is not accurate. Helen E. McMillan was also serving in the House, 1963-1974. GW]. “Jerry went on to be state president of the League and be a Hope Washburn winner, so she went on to do very good things after that,” Mary said.

## 3. What did you find most satisfying?

Mary said they worked on voter registration and supported all levels of programming. Several local people had state jobs. Jerry became president of the state League, Mary Waldo had state responsibility, and Shirley Amundson (the U’s Amundson Hall is named in honor of her husband) was editor of the *State Voter*.

Mary found the League “such a stimulating group of women to work with, and it just kept my mind active and going with the problems that were going on in the world and in the community.”

She said, “I worked on membership and as the treasurer. We didn’t have a lot of money. The Dues were minor compared to now. They covered the needs that we had. We had a campaign in the city to raise funds, too. We didn’t have many businesses, but we raised money through Falcon Heights businesses. We were well received.”

**[This is one of Carolyn Cushing’s added questions.] What have you found most surprising about the LWV? What did not live up to your expectations? How has the LWV affected your life? If you could change one thing what would it be?**

“I’m just surprised at how many really bright women there are around, and it’s wonderful to hear, have them have a chance to talk and to learn and to learn from them.”

Mary couldn’t think of any ways in which they league did *not* live up to her expectations and she didn’t have anything she would change.

“It’s kept me very active and stimulated. I’ve always been interested in government, so this has been my outlet for that. It’s good to be around women who feel the same way.”

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

“Women being elected was a big thing. And women being accepted by the community as viable candidates for positions. You look at the legislature now with so many women in it and it’s just wonderful.”

“I’ve talked to Alice Hausman and I’ve talked to Margaret Anderson Kelliher, and met them at parties and told them the Jerry story, how Jerry ran in ’68, and I got hugs and kisses, ‘We thank you for what you people did that was paving the way for where we are today.’ That makes me feel kinda good.”

Mary told me that women have succeeded by being as good or better than the people who were there in the first place. She thinks they’ve had to prove themselves better just to overcome the barrier.

However, Mary says that Bob Bell accepted Jerry Jenkins as a peer, as a serious woman candidate and he was respectful. He never made it a joke that a woman was running against him. That made it easier for Jerry.

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

“What was important was the chance to show an interest in government and what went on in the world. That was one outlet we had for information and making a difference. You just saw men’s faces, no women in any kind of authority.”

Mary said the League certainly is much more accepted today. For her “it was a wonderful source of friends.” She was part of a group of five in the League in Falcon Heights, and they were great buddies, worked together in the League and socialized together, sometimes *without* their husbands, or *with* husbands on New Year’s Eve. She’s the only one of the five still living here. Three are deceased and one is living out of town.

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

“Yes. The public is more respectful of women and their role in government and how they study and how they think and what they do.”

Mary says the national programs have probably broadened. She and her friends spent a lot of time on state and national things, as opposed to the local level.

**7. How was the LWV important to the community through the years?  
(see chronology list for interviewee to scan for choices)**

“I think people, leaders have gone from the League out to be leaders in other areas.... from the League into other organizations and have boosted them and their thinking and processes and what they’ve done.”

“When I joined, probably wasn’t anybody over 55 in the group. It was an outlet for young mothers to get out and do something in the world. Careers weren’t that available in the ’70s, so it has changed in that respect. I think we have a big responsibility to encourage younger people to get into the group. Now people are so obsessed with their own families. There’s a certain obsession with children that takes up so much of their time—and then their jobs—that they don’t have time left for anything else. We used to have little kids, their mothers would bring them to League meetings and they’d be crawling under the table and under the chairs, be all around the house while we were meeting. That didn’t stop anybody.”

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

She said she couldn't think of anything in response to this question. Then she told me an "off-the-record" story that I won't repeat.

Mary's husband had a master's in dairy and food technology—did international sales, traveled a great deal. He'd come home and tell her he was leaving tomorrow for Germany for 10 days. She said, "I had four kids to raise." "I had the League and that's what kept me sane and I suppose helped me, too, in dealing with so many people we entertained here and in people I saw when we traveled overseas," she said. "The League was a great background for that, in broadening my outlook on life."

**What study/position was most interesting to you? What do you remember learning? Do you remember changing your mind about an issue with more information?**

At first Mary couldn't think of anything. "I was pretty liberal to begin with and it always took a liberal turn."

"Developing parks was important and they've done a good job of that. No other group was supportive of that, at the time that they were doing that."

"Falcon Heights is fairly limited in the number of parks. Two-thirds of our land is public, which is great. I hope it never changes. We tried to support the idea of having it there (at Cleveland and Roselawn). It has worked out well." [Read also about this park under question 2.]

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

With a laugh, Mary said, "I don't want to discriminate against any of my friends. Jerry Jenkins was the most influential in my life, in making me believe that I could do more than I ever thought that I could. ... She was probably the brightest woman I've ever met, extremely bright, very compassionate, always thinking ahead, and with a wonderful sense of humor." [See more about Jerry under question 1.]

"At the second meeting I went to, she was president of the League, and the meeting was being held over at the Grove. I didn't know whose house it was, and I said, 'Oh, what does this guy do at the University?' They looked at me and said, 'He's the current acting president, E. W. Ziebarth.' "

Mary tells another story of being at a party at Jerry Jenkins' house, where she chatted with renowned economist Walter Heller. She told him they'd both graduated from the University of Wisconsin with economics majors, but he "must have understood the subject better."

**What was the most difficult part about Voter Service work? Do you remember any incident in particular? Have you noticed any changes over time? In the audience?**

They worked on voter registration at that time. And they had student housing, which Mary described as a problem because of determining residences and eligibility to vote.

She said she hasn't noticed changes. The League got voter registration starting in the late 1960s.

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

"Well, it's gotten women out of the house and the kitchen and thinking that they could think on an equal level with men," Mary said. "And now we're even let men in the organization," she joked.

"It has broadened many women's minds to what's going on in the world, thinking beyond your own front door and arriving at these conclusions in thoughtful, studious ways."

"The League is so accepting of you as a person when you join and brings you along with them. At the League I was 'one of the girls.' "