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Elizabeth Nord’s Tennis Lesson:
How a Labor Leader Got Her Start in the Pawtucket-Central Falls YWCA Industrial Program

Dorothea Browder

In 1917 one evening after work at the Lorraine Mills in Pawtucket, a fifteen-year-old weaver named Elizabeth Nord made her way over to the Pawtucket-Central Falls Young Women’s Christian Association on Broad Street in Central Falls. Whatever the Association’s name might suggest, Nord was not seeking spiritual guidance. She planned to join the YWCA Industrial Club, a working girls’ club, where she could learn to play tennis after her long workday in the mill. Nord’s destination that night was not an unusual one for a young working woman. In this era, hundreds of young Rhode Island working women gathered in YWCA industrial clubs, especially in the Pawtucket-Central Falls club located right on the border between two of Rhode Island’s largest industrial cities. On that fateful night in 1917, with a modest intent to master tennis, Elizabeth Nord entered a milieu that would profoundly shape her life’s path. The teenage Nord would find that joining the YWCA Industrial Club in Pawtucket was one of the most important and meaningful actions of her life. Through the YWCA she gained skills, knowledge, confidence, and a female support network that together ushered her into a lifelong career advocating for working people.

Industrial clubs for young women, which combined social, educational, and political activities, were part of a national program of the YWCA’s Industrial Department. By the 1930s, the YWCA had initiated more than eight hundred local industrial clubs across the nation. At its height in the 1930s, the program organized 50,000 women annually. In the clubs, young working women like Nord gained knowledge, made friends, played sports, forged a sense of female labor solidarity, and honed public speaking and organizing skills. The national YWCA Industrial Department connected local clubs through shared program work, regional and national conferences, and visits and publications from national staff. Club members who took on leadership roles developed a sense of commonality with other working women across the region and nation.

The YWCA was one of the largest women’s organizations of the first half of the twentieth century, with hundreds of thousands of members. Through industrial clubs, working women joined an ecumenical group of college students, middle-class women, and elite women, all seeking solutions to pressing social problems. One of a number of efforts to organize women across class lines in this period, the national YWCA Industrial Program, though unique in being nominally Protestant, was successful in reaching the most working women of any organization of the period.

Had Nord encountered the YWCAs programs a few years before 1917, she might have been irritated and alienated by its conservative focus. Groups of middle-class Protestant women formed the first Young Women’s Christian Associations in the United States in the mid-nineteenth century, out of concern for the “temporal, moral and religious welfare of self-supporting young women.” Operating primarily in cities on the East Coast, YWCA organizers opened boarding houses, operated room...
and job placement services, set up lunchrooms, and provided educational and recreational classes for young working women. Some Associations offered job training, first in "legitimately feminine" occupations such as sewing and domestic service, and then, as work opportunities expanded, in stenography, typewriting, bookkeeping, and penmanship.1 In the late nineteenth century, staff members visited factories during noon lunch hours to hold Bible classes and religious discussions. YWCA organizers also invited young female workers to evening social events.

In 1904, however, the national YWCA leadership signaled an increased commitment to expanding its working-class membership, appointing Florence Simms to head a new "Industrial Program." Simms was a young woman from Indiana who had worked for the YWCA around the country in various capacities since her 1897 graduation from DePauw University.2 The effort began as an extension of the Association's evangelistic work. Through lessons in "Applied Christianity," elite Protestant women had previously initiated YW programs that encouraged working women to meet a standard of a proper "Christian" life through modesty, temperance, and decency. YW staff reached out to young workers in order to save them from the dangers and temptations to "unchristian behavior" that accompanied urban life. However, working women approached by the YWCA staff urged the organization to offer a program that would be more relevant to their problems of long hours, dirty and unsafe working conditions, and low pay. They wanted some control over the content of YW offerings; they sought programs that would help them understand the political and economic context within which they worked. Florence Simms was sensitive to industrial club members' requests. Furthermore, she had been influenced by new educational theorists like John Dewey and the Social Gospel movement. Consequently, in the early 1910s, Simms shifted the program's approach, from top-down moral uplift to self-governed industrial clubs whose working-class members played a role in program planning.

By the late 1910s, local YWCA clubs like the one at the Pawtucket-Central Falls Association had organized into regional federations that sponsored conferences where working women devised their own activities. Young workers claimed more control at the local level as well. A staff member or "industrial secretary" oversaw the local club activities, but by the time Nord joined in 1917, working women elected leaders and planned programs together with the secretary. The Pawtucket-Central Falls YWCA industrial club had just begun to shift its program toward labor-oriented education along with recreation and social opportunities.

The YWCA industrial clubs had much to offer Rhode Island's working women in the early years of the twentieth century. Rhode Island had an especially high concentration of laboring women; by 1910, more than one in three women over age thirty worked for wages, a higher proportion than anywhere besides Massachusetts and the District of Columbia. Of these women, the majority worked in textiles. Women over age sixteen made up nearly three-fourths of the hosiery and knitted goods workers, over half of those in silk, and over two-fifths of those in the cotton goods and woolen and worsted industries. As working families were dependent on their children's income, most young working-class women left school early and had little access to formal education. Textile work in such cities as Pawtucket and Central Falls was not easy. Women held the lower-paid jobs and had little access to leadership positions (or even membership) in unions. An American Federation of Labor official expressed male unionists' reluctance to accept women as equal workers when he wrote, in 1909, that "it is to the interest of all of us that female labor should be limited so as not to injure the motherhood and family life of the nation." The Pawtucket-Central Falls YWCA industrial club, she was an immigrant who had a strong sense of working-class identity, and she craved educational opportunities and social time with other working women. Born in Lancashire, England in 1902, Nord emigrated to Rhode Island with her father, mother and two brothers when she was ten years old. In England, Nord's mother's family were weavers who worked in the textile factories of Lancashire. Nord's relatives on both her mother's and father's sides were union organizers and supporters; her father, Richard, had been a coal miner in England, and became a machinist in Rhode Island. Union protection was so valued by Nord's English relatives that her English aunt once expressed shock at the idea that Nord and her coworkers were not unionized.

With a family history of textile work, Elizabeth Nord sought employment in the Pawtucket mills.
At fourteen, she was hired as a quiller at the Royal Weaving Company. Quillers operated the quilling machine, which filled the bobbins used in the shuttles on the loom.17 Her younger brother, Charles, also worked at Royal Weaving, training to be a mule spinner, a "skilled" job. When she was fifteen, Nord joined her mother (whose name was also Elizabeth) as a wool weaver at the Lorraine Mill.18 Mrs. Nord wanted a better life for her daughter; she suggested that Elizabeth enter silk weaving, a more highly skilled trade. A year or so later, Nord gained a position at Salamender & Clay's silk mill in Central Falls, which she later described as the finest such mill, highly respected for detailed work with very few imperfections.19 The YWCA was just a short stroll down Broad St., less than a mile from Nord's workplace.

The club offered wonderful social opportunities. At the YWCA, young working women like Elizabeth Nord found a congenial atmosphere where they could meet other young workers with similar interests. Nord recalled that, "especially in my work—wearing—there weren't many people in my age group with the same interests. A lot of married women. Men, you'd see a lot of men. And [married] women.20 In the Industrial Club program, Nord had a "wonderful experience, really a great experience." She remembered:

They would have a special night on which they would serve supper. My dad would say ... "Do you remember when you used to ask me to kill a chicken to take to the YWCA supper?" He had a few chickens, I said, "Can I have a chicken on Thursday night, Dad?"21

Shared suppers anchored the program, built bonds among the women, and fueled the members for a rigorous evening. Club evenings at the YWCA would last from 6:00 until about 9:30. The program included guest speakers, discussion, crafts, and sports. After supper, the industrial members would hold an assembly to discuss important issues. The YWCA's industrial staff—who Nord recalled as "marvelous people, really great people"—would invite experts in issues that interested club members. The visitors lectured, then led conversations, on subjects such as labor laws, economic history, and studies of textile industries abroad.22 After assembly, Elizabeth Nord remembered, club members would have "gymnasium. And then basketball. By that time you'd be half-dead. And then swimming...One right after the other." Nord recalled that "those in your group became your friends, you know, a group of friends with the same interests and age group."23

Nord and her fellow club members grew close over the many recreation opportunities that YWCA staff emphasized to counter long days standing or sitting in factories. Pawtucket YWCA Industrial Secretary Wilma Duntze noted that it was "hardly possible to record the number of hikes and picnics, large and small" that took place.24 The club members went on hikes to Lincoln Woods and outings to Shawomet. A dance drew such a large attendance that it produced a $14.00 surplus, which members added to the fund for summer conferences. And women health experts offered club members a health talk and a demonstration of the physical exam the YWCA offered.25 In 1924, the Industrial Program coordinated with the YWCA's Health Education Department to organize noon volleyball games at Arts, Lorraine, Lumb Knitting, Lebanon, and Sayles Bleachers, among other mills, immediately drawing nearly one hundred participants. Club members also put on exhibition basketball games at the YWCA.26

In addition to recreation, the Pawtucket YWCA offered Elizabeth Nord an opportunity for a female working-class solidarity. It brought her into contact with women who worked outside textile factories, as not all Pawtucket YWCA industrial members were textile workers—their ranks included waitresses, power machine operators, jewelry industry workers, and household employees.27 The industrial program offered women like Nord a chance to forge alliances beyond their own ethnic institutions, similar to but developing earlier than the "working-class Americanism" that Gary Gerstle found in 1930s Woonsocket. Scholars such as Gentile and Louise Lamphere have noted the cultural insularity of ethnic groups in early twentieth-century Rhode Island. Lamphere, writing of Central Falls, found that wage-earning women's "non-work experience was confined to ethnic settings. Neighborhood, church, and leisure activities created networks of families bound together through a common identity as French-Canadian, English, or Polish."28 Nord, though, did not find close ties in her neighborhood or church, so the YWCA offered her particularly valuable opportunities for community. Lucky for her, in the 1920s the YWCA Industrial Program in Rhode Island (and nationally) sought to increase its outreach to immigrants from many backgrounds. By 1935, the Pawtucket YWCA included women who identified as "American, Armenian, Assyrian, Canadian, English, French, French-Canadian, French-American, French-Irish, German, Greek, Irish, Irish-American, Irish-Scotch, Irish-Italian, Italian, Jewish, Lithuanian, Polish, Portuguese, Russian, Scotch, Swedish, and Syrian."29 Its industrial program provided a refuge where young women workers of immensely varied ethnic and religious backgrounds could become acquainted through their common interests. Elizabeth Nord remembered her friends from the YWCA—staff as well as fellow workers—as
The education component of the Pawtucket YW Industrial Program (like that of the national YWCA program) was not directed toward working class mobility. Instead, it addressed issues of deep importance to women workers. Nord recalled her father’s pride in his work for the Pawtucket water department, and her mother’s satisfaction in training her to weave. “I loved my weaving and knocking the old looms around!” Nord recalled. “I never expected to leave it.” What the YWCA offered was both education for personal growth and education that working women could put to use in the workplace.

For Elizabeth Nord, the Pawtucket-Central Falls industrial club program also offered leadership opportunities. In 1923, at age twenty, she became president of her club. She held the position into the late 1920s, when she joined the Pawtucket YWCA’s board of directors. An enthusiastic leader, Nord helped shape the Pawtucket industrial club into a “very flourishing program,” according to Grace Coyle of the national industrial staff, who regularly visited and reported on local clubs in the region.

In the twin cities of Pawtucket and Central Falls, where most of the population of 90,000 was, like Nord, linked to textiles, the industrial club organized educational and artistic projects around the textile industry. In 1925, for instance, members launched a study that provided foundations for a national YWCA program on textile work. The study was initially entitled “Historic and Economic Factors of the Textile Industry: a six weeks’ project.” It was renamed “24,000 Miles of Textile Romance” in the belief that popularizing the study was the only way of making an effort on ‘Historic and Economic Factors’ acceptable. The project’s organizers had high goals that mirrored those of the YWCA Industrial Program: to highlight the dignity of labor, emphasize working women’s skills, and foster a sense of pride, solidarity, and labor internationalism. The project’s and its culminating public exhibit were written up in the local press. In 1930, national Industrial Program staff chose the Pawtucket program to lead a study of the textile industry in New England. The young women who directed Pawtucket’s textile project gathered information and personal stories that the national Industrial Program spread to members throughout the United States, linking Rhode Island’s textile workers with household workers in Minneapolis, candy makers in St. Louis, and mill and tobacco workers in North Carolina.

Not all Pawtucket YW industrial club activities focused on work. “Making a Living and a Life,” the title of a December 1924 talk that drew three hundred members, suggests the educational philosophy in the industrial program. The same month in which the club organized the textile exhibit, Pawtucket and Central Falls members also put on an operetta, “The Fire Prince,” to an audience of 265, and attended weekly “Charm School” on subjects such as “The Charm of a Real Home” and “Appreciate—art, reading and music.” The young women held political debates and rallies in which members “divided into three parties,” Democrat, Republican, and Progressive, “according to individual convictions.” The club members presented their party’s history, its platform, and candidate qualifications, closing with a torchlight parade. Luminaries such as Mary Anderson, Director of the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Labor Department, came to the Pawtucket club.

A lunch room at the YWCA, 1920. RBIS Collections (B16 X17 1426).
to encourage political engagement. Nord and her fellow club members also attended cultural events. In 1931, for example, a group took a special trip to Brown University to hear poet Countee Cullen. These activities demonstrate both how the YWCA's Industrial Program promoted broader horizons for women like Nord, and how the national effort relied on the growing skills of women in the industrial clubs. National and local program staff sought to provide tools that would enable young working women to analyze their place in the broader economic and social system, to maintain pride in their working-class identities, and to understand their responsibilities to other working women, including those in other nations. 

Elizabeth Nord's education took place not only at the YWCA in Pawtucket, but also at regional and national YWCA industrial conferences, where she participated with other working-class YWCA members in workshops, lectures, discussions, and recreation. The summer conferences were planned by elected members of the local industrial clubs, with help from staff. At the annual regional conferences, held in scenic rural settings in upstate New York, Nord and other Rhode Island club delegates met with YWCA members from the northeastern states. The conferences ran for a week or ten days, combining recreation with program planning and in-depth study of political, social, and religious issues. They provided working women like Nord with rare opportunities to hear political and social reformers and labor activists. Prominent leaders in the women's, labor, peace, and cooperative movements lectured and led conversations exploring connections between those movements and working women's lives. A.J. Muste, the peace activist and labor educator, was a frequent YW conference leader. Representatives from the Women's Trade Union League and the National Consumers League also spoke frequently at YW gatherings. Conference participants addressed their responsibilities to other working women. For instance, the women at the 1926 Northeastern summer conference discussed the Passaic, N.J., textile strike at length, took up a collection, and added the money from their camp cooperative bookstore to contribute to the strike fund. Finally, delegates passed platforms meant to guide all industrial club members.

For women like Elizabeth Nord, the summer conferences also provided a rare place for interracial contact and organizing as well as a site for discussing nativist and racial prejudices. Increasingly, working women in the Industrial Program addressed racial justice and participated in local interracial projects. The national Industrial Program sought to foster ties among women of different backgrounds; by the early 1920s, the program was particularly focused on encouraging "Unity in Industry" among native-born white women, women of color, and immigrant women. This emphasis was apparent at the program's conferences. When Elizabeth Nord attended the 1924 National Industrial Assembly, a group of 350 members that met as part of the YWCA's biennial National Convention, the conference program focused particularly on racial and interethnic relationships.

Race was a major emphasis at the northeastern industrial club conference a few months later, at the 1924 Summit Lake Camp in Central Valley, N.Y., where Elizabeth Nord served as a Pawtucket delegate and as conference treasurer. This conference, previously attended by only white delegates, had advocated equal workplace treatment for African-American women five years earlier. By 1924 the gathering was interracial. Participants heard a presentation on the injustices faced by black Americans in general and the "Negro girl in industry" in particular. In the discussion that followed, a number of delegates described their own experiences with prejudice. Myrtle Anderson, a New Yorker who was at the 1924 National Convention with Nord, "told of her difficulty in getting a start in any line of work because of her color." Another delegate, Dorothy Craine, related that she had "met many difficulties with the white girls with whom she worked." Floria Pinkney, a trade school graduate from Brooklyn, "told of her experience and the difficulty of getting a chance to advance in her trade by her own efforts." Pinkney found herself confined to domestic work like many women of color; she soon spearheaded efforts to get household workers' concerns higher on the agenda of the YWCA industrial clubs. Nord's experiences suggest a vibrant culture at regional and national YWCA conferences, in which barriers between ethnic, religious, and racial groups began to crumble as early as the 1920s.

Elizabeth Nord's involvement in the YWCA propelled her into the thriving women's labor education movement of the 1920s. Nord spent the summers of 1923 and 1924 at the Bryn Mawr Summer School for Women Workers. She learned of the program through a flyer on the Pawtucket YWCA bulletin board, applied successfully, and was awarded a scholarship. YWCA industrial secretaries had helped to organize and staff this early experiment in workers' education, and they recruited the bulk of working women in the early years. Founded by Bryn Mawr president M. Carey Thomas in 1921, with help from the YWCA, the Women's Trade Union League, the National Consumers League, and some unions, the Bryn Mawr Summer School educated hundreds of working women in the 1920s. Much like the YWCA summer industrial conferences, the Bryn Mawr summer program brought together working women from a range of backgrounds for education, recreation, and solidarity. The summer school was one of the best class-bridging efforts offered to working women in the 1920s. Only twenty years old when she arrived at Bryn Mawr Summer School in 1923, Nord matriculated with one hundred women from a wide range of geographic areas, occupations, and ethnic and nationality backgrounds. The participants worked in textiles, garment making, electrical instruments, candy making, tobacco, railroads, cardboard manufacturing, tailoring, telephone switchboards, shoe-making, glove making, millinery, automobile assembly, engraving, printing, housekeeping, needlework, horseshoe nail manufacture, typewriter assembly, and paper goods, among other blue-collar occupations. Many identified simply as "American," but others listed their nationalities as "Russian, English, Roumanian, Lithuanian, Czecho-slovak, Austro-Hungarian, Polish, or [or] Italian." The summer program of 1924 included a debate on the Equal Rights Amendment and an international folk music festival, celebrating the ethnic diversity of the student body, as well as economics classes focused on working people, astronomy programs, campfires, and hikes, along with a rigorous writing program.
that emphasized the students’ own experiences. Tensions arose over ethnic and religious differences (especially between Southern white workers and Jewish immigrants from the Northeast, and between non-unionized and unionized students). However, the school’s discussion-based curriculum and emphasis on respecting difference ameliorated those tensions; students frequently described themselves as more broad-minded after attending the Bryn Mawr Summer School.  

More than anything, the Bryn Mawr program appears to have built confidence and skills. Numerous students, including Elizabeth Nord, later credited the summer school with setting them on the road to social justice careers. Nord, an eager student, recalled her experiences there with great enthusiasm, calling the program:

...a whole story in itself which is absolutely amazing...Absolutely marvelous, and the curriculum...was not strictly geared to working in the trade union movement, although that was the purpose...you had social science, in addition to labor legislation, economics, and some psychology and literature.

She remembered with pleasure a motto someone had coined at the school: “To Give the Workers a Voice in the Pen.” 59 Nord recalled an empathetic faculty sympathetic to working women’s problems. 60 She received first-class teaching from the liberal and radical faculty who staffed the school. 60

Elizabeth Nord remained a vivid figure to Bryn Mawr Summer School director Hilda Smith a half century after Nord had matriculated. Smith was impressed with Nord’s pride in her work. Nord told her, “You know, it takes just as long to be a weaver as it does to be a lawyer, and that’s nine years,” Smith recalled, adding that the pride in skill was a family matter. “Her mother taught her to weave; she taught her brother to weave,” Smith remembered. Nord in her first year was a “very quiet little person” who “didn’t stand out.” Hilda Smith recalled. When Elizabeth Nord returned to Rhode Island, American Federation of Labor president William Green asked her to speak about labor education. Green was so impressed that he published her talk in the AFL’s The Federationist, and pressed her into service as a regular lecturer. Nord became, Smith noted, “quite well known as a speaker on labor education.” Smith laughed to remember the school’s happiness to have Nord back for another year, calling her a “most remarkable person.”54 In 1924, Elizabeth Nord was elected to a two-year position on the Bryn Mawr summer school’s Joint Administrative Committee, a governance committee equally composed of college representatives and working women.61 She also attended the Barnard Summer School for Working Women in New York in the mid-1920s. 57

In 1929, Nord sought more in-depth labor education through an eight-month residential program at Vineyard Shore School for Workers. She was one of thirteen working women in the school’s residential program, located in Hilda Smith’s “old-fashioned house,” just across the Hudson River from Vassar College. An outgrowth of the Bryn Mawr summer school, Vineyard Shore offered an intensive program in labor education. As at the Bryn Mawr program and other labor schools, the Vineyard Shore curriculum was based around workers’ own experiences, using courses in psychology, economics, history, and sociology. 60 Nord returned to Sellebrity & Clay in Central Falls after finishing at the Vineyard Shore School in 1930. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, she publicized workers’ education at conferences and labor conventions and in the press.62

The labor school experiences strengthened Nord’s speaking, writing, and organizing skills, but by the time she had enrolled in the Bryn Mawr Summer School, the YWCA already had provided her a strong grounding in labor activism in a female setting. YWCA founders had not anticipated this turn, though by the late 1910s, industrial staff were beginning to promote it. As early as 1916, national Industrial Program staff found themselves “on the firing line,” as one put it, regarding what their relationship should be to trade unions. Though they faced pressure from YWCA leaders and funders to avoid unions, the industrial staff increasingly saw it as their task to help organize working women. 64

Beside providing networking opportunities for industrial club members, the YWCA’s regional and national conferences inevitably led to conversations about labor issues and workers’ right to organize. In the summer of 1919, New England industrial club members formally reinterpreted the YWCA’s purpose from one of moral uplift to one of political action. At the 1919 regional conference in Aitkamont, New York, industrial club delegates passed a platform that called for actively tackling “industrial problems,” and “practicing Social Equality founded on our study of Christ’s relationship to others.”60 This emphasis on awareness of political and industrial issues marked a shift from a stress on personal morality in earlier platforms.68 Further resolutions at the conference included one “that working girls should accept and apply the principle of collective bargaining in order to obtain a living wage and better working conditions.”69 In 1939, arguing for workers’ right to organize was political tinder both among YWCA leaders and across American society. At this time, the word “labor” was, one national YWCA leader later recalled, a “dirty word.”60

A few months after the Altamont conference, a national gathering of club members pressed for major policy changes in the national YWCA. In October 1919, Nord and her fellow club members...
sent a Pawtucket representative, Annie Johnston, to Washington, D.C. for the first YWCA National Industrial Conference.\textsuperscript{71} Sixty-six delegates, representing industrial clubs from around the country, met to discuss a set of issues concurrently under consideration by the First International Congress of Working Women.\textsuperscript{72} They heard from prominent figures like Mary Anderson, Margaret Dreier Robins from the National Women's Trade Union League, Florence Simms, and representatives from other progressive organizations.

At the end of the 1919 conference, delegates passed a momentous resolution that called for the entire YWCA membership and national leadership to acknowledge workers' right to collectively bargain. The resolution also urged the YWCA to educate its own members and the public on labor issues. Delegates sent the resolution to the YWCA National Board for consideration at the 1920 National Convention. It passed at the national convention, but only after significant debate. Its passage prompted a YWCA national board member to publicly resign.\textsuperscript{73}

A sign of the rising power of industrial members and staff, the resolution also ushered in decades of interstice struggle, as the Industrial Program's labor sympathies never gained full acceptance in the YWCA's boards and governing bodies.\textsuperscript{74} Local YWCAs varied greatly in their acceptance of labor activism and in their willingness to allow working-class members to share governance.\textsuperscript{75}

The YWCA Industrial Program was among a number of cross-class women's efforts to help working women, efforts that were sometimes fraught with tensions but nonetheless accomplished much. Starting in the late nineteenth century and well into the early twentieth, organizations that allied elite, middle-class and working-class women, such as the YWCA, the Women's Trade Union League, the National Consumers League, and Working Girls' Clubs, offered rare institutional resources to working women who were largely neglected by labor unions and had little to help them negotiate the power differential between employers and employees.\textsuperscript{76}

Class relations in these networks proved complicated at times. The Women's Trade Union League, for instance, "ran into difficulties in its attempt to form an egalitarian alliance of working women and upper-class women," notes historian Nancy Schrom Dye.\textsuperscript{77} Within the YWCA, which encompassed industrialists' family members as well as poorly paid wage workers, tensions quickly grew once industrial members began to shape their own programs and claim policy mandates for the interests of the working class. Those early struggles within the YWCA over the direction of the program and later local struggles over labor activism illuminate the barriers facing such efforts.

Elizabeth Nord's leadership positions in the YWCA led to leadership positions in a number of these other women's organizations. Within the YWCA, Nord served as discussion leader in a cross-class experiment, the "Student-Industrial Program," that developed in the 1920s (initiated by the national YWCA's Student and Industrial sections). It brought together Pawtucket-Central Falls YWCA members and a group of students at Pembroke College, who were members of Pembroke's Student YWCA.\textsuperscript{78} She served on the Executive Committee of the Pawtucket-Central Falls YWCA throughout the late twenties and early thirties, and in regional YWCA posts as well. Nord was elected president of the regional YWCA mid-winter conference in 1931, at age twenty-nine, and served on the executive board of the YWCA's Northeast Industrial Council, which coordinated programs and conferences in the region. Also in 1931, Nord was elected the first president of the Rhode Island Committee of the Women's Trade Union League, and went to Boston for the League's Conference on Economic Planning. She served on the board of directors of the Rhode Island Consumers League for several years starting in 1934.\textsuperscript{79} Through the YWCA, Nord thus entered a broader network of cross-class female reform.

Through Nord found supportive networks that included middle-class women through these activities, she encountered opposition in the leadership of her own YWCA. The conflicts characteristic of cross-class women's organizations had always existed in had strong support from the staff of the YWCA's national Industrial Program and the working-class women (including Nord) on the YWCA's National Industrial Council, which coordinated the program. Industrial conference participants discussed unions; their programs engendered a sense of solidarity and common goals among working women. Indeed,
YWCA was more sympathetic to employers than to working women on the subject of labor rights.

In 1928, Elizabeth Nord joined the United Textile Workers the first time she was offered the chance. She left work at midnight on a Saturday night and saw an organizer handing out leaflets on “a very stormy night.” She recalled thinking, “My, my...he means it...to be standing out in this kind of weather...I was very impressed.” The union was not very active in the late 1920s, and Nord recalled sometimes being the only one at the union hall on Broad Street at meeting times. The union’s leadership was mostly male and older, like most leadership in the American Federation of Labor. As she began to rise to leadership positions, Elizabeth Nord drew attention because the rest of the upper ranks were exclusively male. She later recalled a friendly warning from a business manager: “They’ll knock the pins from under you” as the only woman organizer. Her mental response, she later recounted, was: “Nobody’s going to knock the pins out from under me,” though at the time she was unaware of the challenges that might face her as a rare female organizer.19

Elizabeth Nord simultaneously worked as a union organizer and an ardent leader of the YWCA, a precarious mix of roles. In 1930, Nord served as an official YWCA National Industrial Council representative at the AFL convention in Boston.20 YWCA national staff member Elsie Harper reported with glee the sharp contrast of conservative-minded old men, white-haired or bald, with the bright, vibrant young YWCA women like Nord.21 Nord herself later skirted an interviewer’s question about prejudice she had encountered as a woman in the labor movement, stating simply, “I think if you want to do something and are interested, you can just do it. This has always been my experience.”22 Being a union organizer did not conflict with her leadership role in the Industrial Program, but when she moved into a YWCA position outside the Industrial Program, it was a different story.

In 1928, the same year she became a member of the union, Elizabeth Nord joined the Pawtucket-Central Falls YWCA’s Board of Directors. During Nord’s tenure on the Pawtucket YWCA Board of Directors, from 1928 to 1936, developments in the YW vividly embodied the persistent tensions around labor activism and working-class agency.23 Labor strife peppered Rhode Island in the early twentieth century. Between 1919 and 1928, strikes broke out across New England’s textile factories, as the industry contracted in response to postwar conditions and international competition.24 Further strikes erupted in the 1930s, culminating in 1934, in what Gary Gerstle terms the “single largest industrial action in the history of American labor,” one which drew in a majority of Rhode Island textile workers.25

Despite people in the national YW organization who supported solidarity among working women, numerous well-off YWCA women preferred to continue to define their mission as uplift of poor working girls. The Central Falls-Pawtucket Association served mill workers and other laboring women in addition to a broader populace but was governed largely by elite, conservative women. In addition, some of the Pawtucket board members were “closely connected with the management of several of the mills,” YWCA national industrial staff member Helen Gifford noted in 1933, adding that those members were “quite antagonistic toward any liberal thinking on industrial questions.”26 When textile strikes broke out in Rhode Island in 1931, Gifford, who oversaw the Northeast region, questioned whether YWCAs in the northeast were committed to the national Industrial Department policy (which supported collective bargaining rights). “There is an appalling problem in relation to strikes in the area,”

Gifford reported to the YWCAs National Industrial Committee. “In Pawtucket,” Gifford observed, “the girl leader of the strike is a leader in the Industrial Department and the Association is linked in other ways with the mill—for instance, the president of the B&K [Pawtucket YWCA Business and Professional] group is secretary to the head of the mill.”27 Such conflicts were not uncommon in local YWCAs with thriving industrial programs for working women. Members of employers’ families often sat on YWCA boards, and the local Community Chest and Manufacturers’ Associations feared a program they saw as potentially dangerous.28

The strikes brought out the class tensions inherent in the Pawtucket YWCA. At the same time that the Pawtucket YWCA would not formally support a 1931 strike, some members went out on strike, and Agnes Kessler, the Pawtucket industrial secretary, “strongly advised other girls not to adopt scab jobs in the mills that were out.”29 This apparent ambivalence reflected the complex governance of YWCAs, initially run by elite women interested in charity, now contending with an Industrial Program filled with labor-friendly staff. In the early thirties, democratizing pressures, brought by the Industrial Program, affected the YWCA movement across the nation.

On the Pawtucket YWCA’s board of directors, Nord encountered conflict with some of the board’s more elite women, who disapproved of labor organizing and of the labor unrest that disruped Rhode Island’s textile industry. Some board members sought to serve as intermediaries between strikers and management, perhaps in a gesture of well-meaning “sisterhood” that ignored the political realities. Nord recalled the 1933 general strike and the widespread 1934 strikes in mills in Woonsocket, Saylesville, Pawtucket, Central Falls, and in the South County mills. At the height of the unrest, in mid-September 1934, about two-thirds of Rhode Island’s textile workers were not at work.30 “This is awful,” Nord remembered some years later, using

Workers and machines for the twisting operation at the Royal Weaving Mill Pawtucket, 1910-1918. BHS Collection (MS X 1192).
the present tense to describe her intense feelings: "the wives of some of the textile manufacturers were on the Board of the YWCA—I can’t tell you how awful this is." Three board members invited Nord to speak to them about the strike. One board member's brother was superintendent of a mill that Nord’s union was picketing; Nord’s board colleague arranged for Nord and her brother to meet in hopes of a rapprochement. "And I did go talk with him," said Nord, "but didn’t have any luck. But," she later commented, "it was a great day in the YWCA in those days," for the "very effective work among industrial girls" despite the tensions on the board.

Nord went right ahead organizing strikers, volunteering during the 1933 strike because the union "just didn’t have the money [or] the people." She recalled: "We had to do our own organizing. We had to do our own negotiating. We were the leaders." She and some coworkers would leave their mill jobs at 3:00 after an eight-hour shift, and go "around anywhere anybody wanted to organize, and we’d organize." Nord, then, was working full-time in her mill job, organizing strikers, and negotiating contracts, all at the same time. She was "the only woman in the whole United States, let alone Rhode Island, who was doing anything in the union." (Nord was 37 at the time).37 She took a paid organizing position with the UTW in the spring of 1934, as unions became invigorated by federal government support under the National Industrial Recovery Act. She was a prominent leader in the September 1934 strike in Rhode Island across the Blackstone Valley.40

After the 1934 unrest, Nord became a national organizer for the United Textile Workers, going to Washington for textile industry hearings and meeting national labor leader Sidney Hillman.41 She later rose to a vice presidency, and was the only woman in the upper ranks of the United Textile Workers for a long time afterward.42 She spent a year in Washington, D.C., Virginia, and Cumberland, Maryland, trying to organize workers often in very hostile circumstances. In one instance, in Cumberland, she realized it was a battle between "Elizabeth Nord and the six-million-dollar Celanese Corporation" as she was the sole organizer. The company police chief and an assistant stood at the door of the union hall to intimidate workers from entering. Nord spoke with a friend in the miners' union, and the next meeting night, the "sidewalk was filled with miners," gathered to prevent police intimidation. The police retreated to a hotel across the street from which they watched the doorway, and the miners picketed the hotel "until these guys [the police] just got up and went away."43 Doubtless her courage and confidence had been fostered by her long history in the YWCA and related female networks.

Elizabeth Nord spent the rest of her life as a labor advocate. She served as union manager in Rhode Island during World War II and again in the late 1950s, and was appointed the first female vice president of the union. She became assistant director for the Rhode Island Department of Labor, and represented labor on the Rhode Island Department of Employment Security's Board of Review. She lived with her father, Richard, who died in 1972 at age ninety-seven. Elizabeth Nord retired in 1976 after sixty years of work, and died in Pawtucket ten years later, at eighty-four.44 Elizabeth Nord did not owe her labor radicalism to the Pawtucket YWCA industrial club, nor to the intense labor education that resulted from her membership there, but the YWCA, Bryn Mawr Summer School and Vineyard Shore did provide her with critical skills, friendships, and networks that served her well in a lifelong career in labor activism. The experiences built her skills and confidence in ways that later supported her as a labor organizer and office-holder in a male-dominated union. Later in life, she attributed her labor movement orientation to her family background, and credited her growth and social life to the YWCA and the related labor programs. She made her closest friends in the Pawtucket Industrial Club, and YWCA work anchored the first two decades of her lifetime of activism. She became a well-known labor activist, and was widely in demand as a speaker in the field of labor education. Nord left the Pawtucket YWCA nearly twenty years after that first tennis-seeking evening only because her organizing job required her to relocate.

Elizabeth Nord's story exemplifies a number of aspects of working women's history in Rhode Island and beyond. First, it illuminates interesting ethnic and religious dynamics in Rhode Island working women's history. As early as the 1910s or even late 1920s, immigrant working women at the YWCA were creating inter-ethnic allegiances that historians more commonly date to the 1930s. They were also organizing across religious lines; while Nord was Protestant, the YWCA industrial
club offered opportunities to many working-class Catholics. Because of the YWCA Industrial Program's ecumenical emphasis, working women in Rhode Island's industrial clubs were able to negotiate religious differences—or at least to meet in friendship—in a climate in which religious affiliation was deeply freighted with class and political implications.

The narrative of Elizabeth Nord's life also illustrates important dynamics of the widespread cooperation between middle-class and working-class women in this era. The class origins of the YWCA, and the Industrial Program's position to the left of the rest of the Association, engendered conflicts over working women's activism, but the middle-class industrial staff greatly helped working women gain skills to advocate for themselves. The YWCA Industrial Program offered education and leadership opportunities to working women. It provided connections to other working women across the nation and to prominent reform and labor groups. Nord's experience at the schools for women workers, which she accessed via her leadership role at the Pawtucket YWCA, allowed her a wider field than the YW program.

Elizabeth Nord's history demonstrates how YWCA opportunities enabled some working women to forge ties with a broader movement, one in which college-educated women and men in the period's major social justice movements sought to use their expertise to improve working women's lives, and to facilitate labor activism. Even before the rise of the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) in the late 1930s, to which scholars attribute a loosening of ethnic and racial insularity, some of Rhode Island's more ambitious working women were seeking broader horizons and forging common cause with a diverse group. The Pawtucket YWCA set Nord on that path.

Nord's life trajectory also demonstrates relationships between Rhode Island textile workers and networks of reform and radicalism, beyond the textile unions that usually figure at the center of the narrative—and it shows a world of female labor organizing that existed in a different arena from the male-dominated union leadership. Women such as Elizabeth Nord were not downtrodden female wage-earners, dutifully drudging away and wishing for a leg up into the middle class. At the Pawtucket YWCA industrial club and in the networks the club opened up, a group of mostly immigrant or second-generation working women sought to claim rights as workers and to enjoy a lively fellowship in a rapidly changing, complex period in Rhode Island history.

Notes


5. Department of Method, The Handbook of the Young Women's Christian Association Movement (New York: National Board, Young Women's Christian Association, 1914), 34.


YWCA of the U.S.A. Records (hereafter "YWCA"), Sophia Smith Collection (hereafter "SSC"), Box 508, folder 7, Smith College, Northampton, Mass. Also, see Dorothy Browder, "A Christian Solution," and, for description of early membership in the program, "Minutes from Field Industrial Secretaries' Conference," Jan. 3-9, 1916, YWCA, Box 501, folder 17, SSC.
12. Dunnigan, et al., "Working Women," 11-12. By the 1910s, increasing numbers were attending high school or business college or enter the growing field of clerical work, which paid little better than factory labor but offered advantages in class status and contacts for those who wished them. Shae


14. Quoted in Alice Kessler-Harris, Out to Work: A History of Wage-Earning Women in the United States, 20th Anniversary Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 202. Perhaps in response to such indifference among union leaders, a 1910 government survey of women textile workers found they had "no opinion" about unions, though that had changed by the 1930s, when Rhode Island's working women were quite active in the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO).


16. Oral History Interview with Eliz

17. Annual Report of Industrial De


19. Tino J. Adam, "Membership Report January 1, 1933," and Mistress File Statistics, Jan. 1, 1933, YWCA, Box 41, RH5. No member statistics could be located for the 1920s. Other women might join the YWCA only for the sports opportunities, or for the Professional and Business Club of white collar women, or for homemaking classes.


22. Such subjects were still controversial within the YWCA; national staff in 1916 discussed the possibility of circulating information about federal and state labor laws "if we dare," Brawer, A Chris


27. Annual Report of Industrial Depa


29. Tino J. Adam, "Membership Re

30. Nord also had an older brother who left home at age 14 and moved to New York State. Nord OH 1976, 20.


36. Report of Miss Grace L. Garfield, Industrial Secretary, for March, 1925, YWCA, Box 155, Folder 6, YWCA. Cole notes the "spas among members and "a little advanced education" among some, and spoke well of the local indus

37. Bulletin to Industrial Secretaries of the Young Women's Christian Association in the United States, XI, February 1926, YWCA, Box 511, folder 10, YWCA. The program also encouraged national labor solidarity; see, for instance, "Notes on the Meeting of the World Fellowship and Industry Committees of the Northeast Industrial Council, June 3, 1928," and "World Fellowship and Industry 7/1928," YWCA, Box 506, folder 16, YWCA.

38. Mary Mardan, "Minutes of the Meeting of Executive Committee of the National Industrial Council, Jan. 4-5, 1930," YWCA, Box 506, folder 16, YWCA.


40. See, for instance, Annual Report of Pawtucket Industrial Depa


42. Proceedings, National Indust

43. Proceedings, National Indust

44. Findings of the Summit Lake In

45. Findings of the Summit Lake In

46. Findings of the Summit Lake In
51. Pinkney also was active in A. Phillip Randolph’s Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the International Ladies’ Garment Workers’ Union, which was engaged in building labor movements for African American organizers, even as she remained active in the YWCA Industrial Program through at least the early 1930s. Pinkney’s story exemplifies the interrelated labor networks that YWCA conferences fostered. Daniel Katz, All Togetherness Different: Yiddish Socialists, Garment Workers and the Labor Roots of Multiculturalism (New York: New York University Press, 2011), 111-112; Melissa Chateauvert, Marching Together: Women of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters (Urbanana: University of Illinois Press, 1998), 44; Robertson, Christian Sisterhood, 130.

52. Findings, Summit Lake Industrial Center, 1924.


55. Keeler-Harris, Out to Work, 243-45.


60. For more on the faculty, see Helix, “Blue Collars and Bluestockings.”

61. Smith and that initially Nord had seemed to passive that the school did not plan to accept her for a second year. Smith interview, 21-22.


63. Smith interview, 3-5, and 21-23. The Pawtucket and industrial schools for women workers helped support the school for instance, a May 1928 food sale realized $23.00, which was sent to the school’s Rhode Island committee, Report of the Industrial Secretary, May 1928, Central Falls/Pawtucket YWCA, YWCA, Box 45, RHIS.

64. Marion W. Rowley, “Partners in Progress,” New England Labor, October 1928, 9-10. As the reference to “Social Equality” implies, the delegates also resolved, “that Colored girls should be given the same opportunity in industry as white girls.” These resolutions are the more remarkable for their passage during the post-war crackdown on labor rights and the horrendous anti-black rioting of the summer of 1919. For more discussion of the labor platform, see Brown, “A Christian Solution.” For a consideration of the sources of racially egalitarian language in the Industrial Program, see Brown, “From Uplift to Agitation.” Chapters 2 and 3.


66. Records of Field Industrial Soci- etaries’ Conference, January 3-9, 1916, remarks of Miss Gogin and discussion on January 7, in particular, YWCA Box 501, folder 17, SSC.

67. Annual Report, Altamont Industrial Council, Altamont Camp, June 28 to July 12, 1919 (Northeastern Field Committee, YWCA), YWCA Box 501, folder 13, SSC.


69. Annual Report, Altamont, 1919, 3. Altamont staff had encour- aged the collective bargaining focus, although they had just been fending off threats of “replacement,” desires of buffalos to withdraw support if the YWCA took any stand on legislative stand on “Brokers.” See “Report of Miss Gramman, Sum- mer of 1919,” YWCA, Box 315, folder 12, SSC. As the reference to “Social Equality” implies, the delegates also resolved, “that Col- ored girls should be given the same opportunity in industry as white girls.” These resolutions are the more remarkable for their passage during the post-war crackdown on labor rights and the horrendous anti-black rioting of the summer of 1919. For more discussion of the labor platform, see Brown, “A Christian Solution.” For a consideration of the sources of racially egalitarian language in the Industrial Program, see Brown, “From Uplift to Agitation.” Chapters 2 and 3.


71. Official Delegates, National Indus- trial Convention, Washington, D.C., October 24-28, 1919, YWCA, Box 501, folder 14, SSC.


74. See, for instance, Margaret Sprat, “The Pittsburgh YWCA and Industrial Democracy in the 1920s,” Pennsylvania History 59 (January 1992), 5-20. See also Stewart, The Industrial Work of the YWCA.

75. For instance, in a list of “Our Common Problems” in the find- ings from their 1919 first national convention, the delegates included “Financial backing of the YWCA from those who do not uphold in Industrial Standards, or who might wish to limit its free- dom in upholding those records.” Report of National Industrial Con- gress of the Young Women’s Christian Association called by the National Industrial Committee in Washington, D.C., October 24 to 28, 1919, 15, YWCA, Box 501, folder 14, SSC.


77. Dye, As Equals and As Sisters, 4. The WTUL also became frus-