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WOMEN'S GROUPS AND THE EXTENSION OF CITY SERVICES IN EARLY TWENTIETH-CENTURY DALLAS

by *Patricia Evridge Hill*

In 1904, Sarah P. Decker told women at a national assembly of the General Federation of Women's Clubs, "Dante is dead. He has been dead for several centuries, and I think it is time that we dropped the study of his *Inferno* and turned our attention to our own."¹ Dallas women heard Mrs. Decker's message. Club women appropriated speaking and organizational skills learned in benevolent societies, literary clubs, and choral groups and challenged the vision of largely unrestricted growth that guided members of the early city's business elite. At the same time, Dallas club women stretched convention by manipulating the middle-class woman's traditional role as homemaker and "lady." Although few local women challenged the notion of instinctive female traits, they used traditional beliefs about women's talents and interests to address family issues and aspects of the urban environment associated with juvenile delinquency, poverty, and illiteracy. Through their advocacy of expanded social services and major municipal public health and sanitation programs, federated women's clubs became efficient reform vehicles in the early years of the twentieth century.

The "projects" sponsored by middle-class club women mirrored those of federated women's clubs in older urban areas and, although altruistic, were intended to hasten Dallas' maturation from frontier town to city. Early clubs, such as the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, were local responses to well-known eastern organizations. Dallas women continued to depend on national organizations headquartered in older American cities to provide an ideological basis and goals for local club projects even after they turned their attention from the intellectual improvement of club members to major reform efforts.² Club women considered problems such as crime, juvenile delinquency, and illiteracy the social costs of urban growth. They envisioned programs established by women's clubs and expanded city services as remedies for social problems associated with urban capitalism. Women's club leaders viewed their accomplishments as concrete signs of the city's urbanity. Since their vision of growth was based on the local implementation of programs originated elsewhere, club women valued efficient organizing and the ability to conduct effective publicity campaigns above creativity. In the process, club members made Dallas residents more aware of the uneven nature of urban growth, proposed solutions to social and civic problems, and gained unprecedented respect and influence while expanding public roles for women.³

Organized women's groups appeared in Dallas as early as 1870, when the southern branch of the Presbyterian Church established a Ladies' Aid

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Society to institutionalize the nursing and undertaking services that women of all denominations provided on the frontier. The Ladies Hebrew Benevolent Association and the Methodist Woman's Missionary Society formed within the next five years for similar purposes.⁴

Women's literary clubs in Dallas date from the founding of the Shakespeare Club in 1866. Shortly after the turn of the century, the women who guided Dallas' early women's clubs articulated an urban vision much like that adopted by middle-class, Progressive Era reformers who supported Elmer Scott's Civic Federation after 1917. Both groups sought to reduce crime, juvenile delinquency, transience, and other social problems through environmental change and shared the belief that environmental change could be effected through education, the elimination of poverty, and increased cultural awareness. In spite of later similarities, the agenda of Dallas' women's clubs was firmly in place a decade before the founding of the Civic Federation. Women's clubs focused their attention and subsequently that of Dallas residents on urban safety, sanitation, and health, while Progressives affiliated with the Civic Federation emphasized adult education and social work. Women's clubs were also interested in education but concentrated their efforts on that of children rather than adults. Since both groups articulated reform visions, membership overlapped significantly after 1917. Many women, including Mrs. Wendell (Stella White) Spence, Mrs. Henry (May Dickson) Exall, and Mrs. Victor Hexter, who worked in the local suffrage movement and joined the clubs in the decades immediately before and after 1900, later supported the reform programs of the municipal welfare department and contributed to the Civic Federation.⁵

National calls for women's clubs to take more initiative in reform efforts galvanized the opinions of local women. Women's groups, such as the Shakespeare Club, the Standard Club, the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle, the Mathian Club, and the Schubert Choral Club, were vital components in the education of women in early Dallas.⁶ Kathleen McCarthy describes the club as a "college" for the mature woman. In Dallas before 1915 (the year Southern Methodist University opened), clubs were often the only post-secondary education even the most capable daughters of prominent families could secure. As leading members began to steer club activity away from exclusively cultural pursuits and toward reform efforts, the familiar structure of the clubs gave women "the self-assurance they needed to move beyond the narrow limits of the home, ... encouraging them to pool their resources to found and fund new institutions."⁷

As early as 1898, Mrs. Henry (May Dickson) Exall and Mrs. William A. ("Pauline Periwinkle") Callaway united members of the city's five literary clubs to form the Dallas Federation of Women's Clubs. Reflecting its origin among literary club members, the City Federation chose the acquisition of a public library as its first project. Dallas women raised

\$12,000 by subscription from over 1,000 donors. Andrew Carnegie offered \$50,000 for a library building on the condition that the city agree to provide a site and at least \$5,000 yearly for maintenance. The first Dallas Public Library opened on Harwood Street in 1901.⁸

In Dallas as in other American cities, the “excesses of the Gilded Age brought the very notion of noblesse oblige, and the elitism it embodied, into question.”⁹ Emboldened by the success of the library campaign, leaders of Dallas’ women’s clubs reassessed their goals for society and determined to take a more active role in shaping the city. Barely two years after Mrs. Decker’s national call to action, Dallas’ Pauline Callaway wrote, “Men have shut one eye and squinted so hard at commercial interest with the other, they see little else.”¹⁰ She urged women to get involved in the suffrage movement and to fight for the extension of municipal services.

Born Isadore Sutherland in Michigan, Pauline Callaway wrote for the *Dallas Morning News* between 1893 and 1916 under the name “Pauline Periwinkle.” In her capacity as the paper’s first “woman’s” editor, she coordinated news of club projects and publicized the reform efforts of her contemporaries. Callaway, who organized the first Woman’s Suffrage Club in Texas in 1894, sprinkled even the most innocuous columns with arguments in favor of suffrage and expanded roles for women. Her efforts were instrumental in facilitating the transition of local women from exclusively home-centered roles into public extensions of woman’s traditional sphere. Commenting on the gradual acceptance of local suffrage leaders, Callaway claimed in 1897, “the rabid, unreasoning prejudice against the woman’s movement has almost disappeared.”¹¹ Noted child-welfare expert, Dr. Henry S. Curtis, called Callaway one of four outstanding women of her era (along with Dr. Anna Howard Shaw, Jane Addams, and Carrie Chapman Catt). Throughout her career in Dallas, Callaway maintained close contacts with national feminist leaders and in 1908 brought Dr. Shaw to the city to speak to a district meeting of federated women’s clubs.¹²

In addition to her work as a journalist, Pauline Callaway was active in the Dallas Federation of Women’s Clubs — serving as the organization’s seventh president. With Mrs. Joseph E. Cockrell, she served on the Dallas City Plan and Improvement League, the group that brought George Kessler to Dallas. Both women worked for the implementation of Kessler’s park proposals and were instrumental in securing support among business leaders for the greenbelt along Turtle Creek in North Dallas and Kessler Park in Oak Cliff. Pauline Callaway also organized a free kindergarten movement. She died in 1916.¹³

Dallas club women were successful city builders. Many new city services, including the employment of Dallas’ first probation officer and a playground supervisor, began as privately sponsored projects of women’s clubs. A program’s success usually led to quick incorporation by the city — often obscuring its origins with club women. It is significant that many

services now considered essential components of municipal government were proposed by women's organizations. The extension of city services, to which many Dallas women were committed, was at times a painful process. Club members' goals and priorities often placed them in direct opposition to local business leaders and merchants, and at times to their own husbands.

Dallas women pushed aggressively for reform because they shared a modified version of the middle-class vision of urban growth articulated by local business leaders. Like their fathers, husbands, and brothers, Dallas club women dreamed of building a great city. They combined genuine concern for the city's less fortunate residents with ambitions of urban grandeur. Reform programs, new city services, and local affiliates of national organizations reassured middle-class residents that Dallas was indeed a "civilized" place and not simply an overgrown frontier town. Local implementation of reform projects initiated in New York, Boston, Philadelphia, and Chicago gave comfort in much the same way as did traditional architectural forms.

Social reform began early in Dallas. In 1903, Dallas women led a campaign to establish juvenile courts and "a home for juvenile offenders — not a reform school."¹⁴ The Chicago Women's Club had been the force behind the nation's first juvenile courts in 1899.¹⁵ Dallas club women shared Chicago Judge Julian Mack's and Denver Judge Ben Lindsey's conviction that economic misery explained juvenile delinquency. The Federation of Women's Clubs proposed courts based on Lindsey's Denver model that "avoided the concept of punishment and set up a system to bring child offenders into an environment of good care and educational opportunities."¹⁶ In addition, Dallas women concerned about the rough treatment and crude conditions facing female prisoners and children at the local jail successfully persuaded authorities to hire a police matron in 1904.¹⁷ Karen Blair calls women's rights issues such as jail matrons, scholarships, and coeducation among the primary interests of federated women's clubs in eastern cities at the turn of the century.¹⁸

When civil leaders refused to extend city services or act on proposals presented by the Dallas Federation of Women's Clubs, members often sponsored programs themselves. Middle-class club women believed that Dallas should display the same types of public services as the established American cities they chose as models. This determination led to the Federation's assumption of office rent and a first year's salary for W.G. Leeman, Dallas' first probation officer. In 1909, after a public campaign in which club women were ridiculed for advocating municipal playgrounds, the Federation used its own resources to support the city's first playground supervisor and two assistants. After two years of successful operation and the work of propagandist Charles Martin to help offset initial condemnation of the project, the city assumed responsibility for playground maintenance and paid the salaries of playground personnel. The Dallas

Federation of Women's Clubs' efforts to ensure citizen safety during the first two decades of this century led to the city's enactment of a pure-food ordinance and the establishment of a Board of Health and a Fire Prevention Committee.¹⁹

In 1908, the year of the Trinity River's record flooding and the ensuing epidemics of malaria and typhoid fever, the Federation of Women's Clubs initiated a pure-water movement. Two years later, an acute shortage led to the city's impounding the waters of White Rock Creek to provide Dallas, still dependent on the Trinity River, with a reserve water supply. Dallas residents had suffered polluted water for decades. During the 1890s, the Turtle Creek Pumping Station switched from the Trinity's West Fork to the Elm Fork because the city water supply already was contaminated. Dallas' early leaders encouraged manufacturers of leather goods, mills processing buffalo hides, and manufacturers of cotton ginning equipment to locate along the often sluggish river.²⁰ Early twentieth-century women's groups demanded water purification but found specific plans stalled by city officials who "were inclined to treat the matter of filtration lightly." In 1908, most local businessmen thought purification would not be necessary after the completion of the White Rock reservoir (still six years away) and refused to support clean water proposals.²¹ In a study of cities throughout the South, David Goldfield concludes, water contamination was not uncommon and claims city officials regularly "eschewed investments in sanitary systems" even after major epidemics.²²

Dallas women refused to wait for the reservoir to be completed and stepped up demands for chemical purification the year after the shortage. Members of the Federation of Women's Clubs spoke in neighborhoods and schools, and Pauline Callaway used her column in the *Dallas Morning News* as a forum for the clean water campaign. Pure water advocates paired arguments that all citizens, regardless of income, were intitled to clean water with warnings that repeated epidemics would give the city a reputation for being unhealthy and retard growth. Despite business leaders' reluctance to undertake municipal projects that would increase tax rates, city government responded to public pressure and, in 1911, chlorination of city water began.²³

The reform efforts and initiative taken by women's clubs to extend city services and create a more humane urban environment drew the attention of Dallas moderates. After World War I, men impressed with the time local women devoted to social services and the war effort, worried that time spent on the Victory Loan Campaign might interfere with passage of the suffrage amendment. One Dallas man called for an organization of men to assist "in carrying this amendment for them." He estimated 1,400 Dallas women had participated in local war efforts and claimed that area men should come out in support of suffrage to "demonstrate their appreciation of the patriotic work women have been and are doing."²⁴ Dallas trade unionists, partners in the city's first two progressive coalitions

in the decades between 1880 and World War I, also supported the suffrage amendment — their newspaper declaring A.F. and L. men “uncompromisingly committed” to voting rights for women.²⁵

A large majority of Dallas voters supported the Nineteenth Amendment. Almost immediately, Dallas women ran for seats on the Board of Education and gained political representation at the state level. In April 1920, Lenore P. Hall won her bid for one of six seats on the school board. She became the first woman to serve the city in an elected capacity since 1908, when voters had elected Mrs. E.P. Turner, a reformer later active in the Civic Federation, and Mrs. P.P. Tucker, to the Board of Education. Mrs. Hall was reelected to a seven-member board in 1922 and again in 1924 with Mrs. H.L. Peoples. Dallas women maintained a presence on the school board throughout the 1920s with the reelection of Mrs. Peoples to a second term in 1927, along with newcomer Mrs. W.P. Zumwalt. At the state level, Edith E. Wilmans served in the legislature between 1922 and 1924 as one of five representatives from Dallas County.²⁶

Some Dallas women received their political education through participation in the Municipal Non-Partisan Political Association (MNPPA), a group formed in 1923 by farmers, union members, and socialists to elect a mayor and city commissioners favorable to labor.²⁷ The MNPPA sent questionnaires to local candidates, who were then interviewed and evaluated. It also made recommendations among those candidates running for seats in the legislature, and in races for county commissioner, county judge, and school superintendent. From its inception, the Municipal Non-Partisan Political Association included women and represented diverse groups of progressive Dallas residents who sought an alternative to hardline proponents of growth.²⁸ Early officers included George Clifton Edwards, a socialist attorney, and labor leaders August Shultz and W.M. Reilly. A woman served as the group's first treasurer. The Dallas Women's Voters League sent delegates to the MNPPA's weekly meetings at the Labor Temple downtown. For many, a trip to the business district for political purposes represented a bold new step. In early 1925, more women became involved in the political process when the city's neighborhood improvement leagues were invited to join the Association. Like the Dallas Women's Voters League, neighborhood groups were allowed the same representation as unions — five delegates for the first 250 members, then one additional delegate per 100 members. Individual members had only 1/50 of a vote, but were welcomed and given all other rights. The progressive coalition of farmers, unionists, socialists, and women was unable to elect its own candidates throughout the 1920s but ensured the election of some of the more flexible and reform-minded candidates supported by business interests. The cooperation of the Municipal Non-Partisan Political Association was also crucial to Progressive business leaders' efforts to combat the electoral power of the Ku Klux Klan.

Dallas women gained a new measure of respect through their club

work in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Their success in extending city services relaxed traditional attitudes barring women from participation in public life. Respect and tolerance were limited, however. With the remarkable exception of State Representative Wilmans, Dallas women were active in areas perceived as logical extensions of woman's traditional sphere (education, concern for juvenile delinquents, playgrounds, etc.). The prominent role of women in urban movements was made more palatable by the social character of many urban issues. Manuel Castells calls women the "organizing agents of social life" and, as such, the struggle for alternatives or a better life may be construed to be part of the female domain. According to Castells, issues remote from immediate structural change often have engendered "a predisposition among men to accept women's leading role ... and, more importantly, makes participation appealing for women in the defense or transformation of a world whose meaning is closely connected to their daily lives."²⁹

Middle-class women in early Dallas, whether as club members or participants in neighborhood groups and political associations, enjoyed a great deal of influence and achieved high levels of success when their causes could be rationalized as being of "natural" interest to women. Privately, within their own families, and in public campaigns for increased city services and improved urban safety, sanitation, and education, club women moderated the pro-growth vision of Dallas business leaders. In their efforts to implement a more humane urban vision — one that tempered growth-oriented civic policies with concern for the quality of urban life — Dallas women were paradoxically shielded from accusations of "unwomanly" behavior by the same patriarchal mores that limited their activity.

NOTES

¹Quoted in Eric F. Goldman, *Rendezvous with Destiny: A History of Modern American Reform* (New York, 1952; reprint ed., New York, 1977), p. 144.

²John William Rogers, *The Lusty Texans of Dallas* (New York, 1951; new expanded edition, Dallas, 1965), pp. 342, 359. As late as the mid-1920s, members of the Dallas Woman's Club reported on garden club activities in Philadelphia and commissioned a study of national trends before organizing the Dallas Garden Club in 1926. For more information on club-related activities in Dallas, see Diana Church, "Mrs. E.P. Turner: Clubwoman, Reformer, Community Builder," (Dallas County Heritage Society) *Heritage News* (Summer 1985), pp. 9-14; Elizabeth York Enstam, "The Forgotten Frontier: Dallas Women and Social Caring, 1895-1920," *Legacies* (Spring 1989), pp. 20-28; and Michael V. Hazel, "Dallas Women's Clubs: Vehicles for Change," *Heritage News* (Spring 1986), pp. 18-21.

³Karen J. Blair has written the most complete analysis of club women in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century American cities. See *The Clubwoman as Feminist: True Womanhood Redefined, 1868-1914* (New York, 1980).

⁴Rogers, *The Lusty Texans of Dallas*, p. 341.

⁵Sam Acheson, *Dallas Yesterday*, edited by Lee Milazzo (Dallas, 1977). pp. 207-208; Elmer Scott, *88 Eventful Years* (Dallas, 1954), pp. 100-101.

⁶Rogers, *The Lusty Texans of Dallas*, pp. 341-43.

¹Kathleen D. McCarthy, *Noblesse Oblige: Charity and Cultural Philanthropy in Chicago, 1849-1929*, (Chicago, 1982), p. 47.

²"A Flattering Attendance," *Dallas Morning News*, May 11, 1899, p. 10; Acheson, *Dallas Yesterday*, p. 205; Rogers, *The Lusty Texans of Dallas*, pp. 265, 342.

³McCarthy, *Noblesse Oblige*, p. 99.

⁴Quoted in Alma Cunningham, "Periwinkle Pen Aided Humanity," *Dallas Morning News*, Centennial Edition, April 11, 1942, sec. 3, p. 12.

⁵Quoted in "The First Fifty Years of *The Dallas Morning News*: Second Ten Years Are Eventful — 1896-1905," *Dallas Morning News*, Fiftieth Anniversary Jubilee Edition, October 1, 1935, sec. 3, p. 6.

⁶Mrs. E.B. Reppert, "First Woman's Editor of *News* Led Fight for Each Big Improvement," *Dallas Morning News*, Fiftieth Anniversary Jubilee Edition, October 1, 1935, sec. 5, p. 10.

⁷Reppert, "First Woman's Editor of *News* Led Fight for Each Big Improvement;" Mary Carter Toomey, "Dallas' First Woman's Club Born Two Months After *The Dallas News*," *Dallas Morning News*, Fiftieth Anniversary Jubilee Edition, October 1, 1935, sec. 5, p. 8; Cunningham, "Periwinkle Pen Aided Humanity."

⁸Quoted in Cunningham, "Periwinkle Pen Aided Humanity."

⁹James Leiby, *A History of Social Welfare and Social Work in the United States, 1915-1972* (New York, 1978) p. 146.

¹⁰Goldman, *Rendezvous With Destiny*, pp. 93-95.

¹¹Reppert, "First Woman's Editor of *News* Led Fight for Each Big Improvement."

¹²Blair, *The Clubwoman as Feminist*, p. 119. Chicago women shared those concerns. Leiby credits the Chicago Women's Club with efforts to improve conditions for women and children in police stations and jails as early as 1883. See *A History of Social Welfare*, pp. 146-47.

¹³Reppert, "First Woman's Editor of *News* Led Fight for Each Big Improvement." Although the idea of making rent payments and paying the salary of the city's first probation officer probably came from Chicago, it is important to note that in Dallas women's clubs assumed this role because the city initially refused to do so. In Chicago, club women deliberately paid salaries and even chose the probation officers themselves in order to keep the program out of the hands of "political spoilsmen." See Leiby, *A History of Social Welfare*, p. 147.

¹⁴Texas Writers Project, "Dallas Guide and History," Works Progress Administration typescript, 1940, Texas/Dallas Collection, Dallas Public Library, chronology, p. 00705; Department of Urban Planning, City of Dallas, *Comprehensive Land Use Policy Plan for Dallas*, 1976, Urban Information, Dallas Public Library, p. II-11.

¹⁵Reppert, "First Woman's Editor of *News* Led Fight for Each Big Improvement."

¹⁶David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region, 1607-1980* (Baton Rouge, 1982), p. 96.

¹⁷Atcheson, *Dallas Yesterday*, pp. 205-206.

¹⁸"Barry Miller to the Men," *Dallas Democrat*, May 3, 1919, p. 3.

¹⁹*Dallas Craftsman*, August 8, 1919, p. 4.

²⁰Texas Writers Project, "Dallas Guide and History," chronology, p. 00707; Cochran, *Dallas County*, pp. 213, 237, 240-241. The size of the Board of Education and length of members' terms varied throughout the 1920s, resulting in irregularly-spaced elections.

²¹Information on the Municipal Non-Partisan Political Association is taken from the group's minutes between May 3, 1924 and January 31, 1925. See Dallas County Farm-Labor Political Conference, Collection 159, Labor Archives, Special Collections, UTA Library.

²²During the 1920s, the only alternative to a candidate fielded by Dallas business interests was often a candidate sponsored by the Ku Klux Klan.

²³Manuel Castells, *The City and the Grassroots: A Cross-Cultural Theory of Urban Social Movements* (Berkeley, 1983), p. 68.