

# *Grand River Valley* **History**

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**In This Issue...**

**By the Book:**

**A Librarian's Job In World War I**

**Resisting the Nazis:**

**A Personal War**

**A Woman's Place:**

**100 Years of the Grand  
Rapids YWCA**



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## **Cover Photo:**

Reader in the "Y" Hut library,  
Boulevard de l'Océan, St.  
Nazaire, France, April 5, 1919.  
(Grand Rapids Public Library  
Local History Department)

## **Departments**

- 2 Letter From the  
Publisher

## **Contents**

### **3 By the Book: A Librarian's Job in World War I**

By Samuel H. Ranck

### **9 Resisting the Nazis: A Personal War**

By Joseph Stevens

### **16 A Woman's Place: 100 Years of the Grand Rapids YWCA**

By Marilyn Martin





# A Woman's Place: 100 Years of the Grand Rapids YWCA

by Marilyn Martin

On March 15, 1893, the Grand Rapids Evening Press published an editorial calling attention to the growing number of young working women in Grand Rapids and urging the formation of a Young Women's Christian Association. Such an establishment, the editorial said, would provide these young women with a respectable place "at noontime to eat their lunches, dress their hair and refresh themselves generally for the afternoon's work." Most important, a YWCA would keep them "from straying, [becoming] careless in . . . conduct, then bold and finally reprehensible brazen creature(s) of the street."<sup>1</sup>

The paper's call for a YWCA reflected dramatic changes in the United States in the decades after the Civil War. Between 1865 and 1900, America grew up and moved to the city. The demand for war material during the 1860s had spurred industrial growth as did westward expansion after the war, the burgeoning technological advances of the Industrial Revolution, and the development of an intercontinental railroad system. Millions of European immigrants provided labor for newly built factories, sparking dramatic urban growth. By 1900, in a nation once dominated by farmers and agrarian interests, cities and urban concerns had seized the top spot on the national agenda.

Like other American cities, Grand Rapids experienced enormous population growth in the

last half of the nineteenth century, from 2,500 persons in 1850 to 90,000 by 1900. Among the new residents were many young women, some the daughters of European immigrants, others from nearby farming towns, all seeking the city's greater opportunities – for jobs, for matrimonial prospects, and even for greater personal freedom.

Unfortunately, the city had little to offer these women other than positions as shop clerks, domestics, office workers, and factory employees. While it was perfectly proper for men to live in boarding houses, eat and drink at neighborhood bars and restaurants, and take advantage of a variety of entertainments, single, unescorted women were not expected to venture out in public.

For young men who wished for wholesome recreation or quiet conversation and companionship, a chapter of the national Young Men's Christian Association had been formed in Grand Rapids in 1866, immediately after the Civil War. No such corresponding local organization existed as yet to serve the women of Grand Rapids, although YWCAs had been established in two other Michigan cities, Detroit and Jackson.

The YWCA movement first took root in England in 1855 with the founding of two groups: the General Female Training Institute, to house nurses returning from the Crimean War, and the Prayer Union, to address the

spiritual welfare of women and girls. The two organizations united in 1877, taking the name Young Women's Christian Association. In the United States, a Ladies' Christian Union was formed in New York City in 1858 to provide safe housing for young working women. Eight years later, the first Young Women's Christian Association in the United States was established in Boston. The idea quickly spread as prominent, well-educated, and progressive women throughout the country took up the cause of providing decent, affordable, and safe housing; nourishing meals in respectable surroundings; opportunities for relaxation, education and recreation; and religious and spiritual support to their working sisters.

The local effects of a severe nationwide economic depression that persisted for much of the 1890s prevented civic leaders from responding immediately to the call for a YWCA in Grand Rapids. By January 1895, however, conditions had improved sufficiently to encourage a group of energetic and prominent local women, including Frances A. Rutherford, the first female city physician in the United States, to organize the Women's Gymnasium of Grand Rapids, later the Women's Gymnasium and Noon Rest, located at 21 South Division in the McMullen block, a few hundred feet west of the current YWCA building.



A few months after the group's February incorporation, its much-anticipated baths were installed, wherein "...a single bath may be taken and paid by any reputable woman," a welcome amenity at a time in which indoor plumbing was still the exception rather than the rule.<sup>2</sup> By June, the noon rest component was serving lunch to 40 to 50 unescorted women a day and offering them a quiet, darkened room furnished with couches and pillows where they might rest before returning to work. Evening socials and lectures, such as "The Uses and Abuses of Bicycle Riding," were added, and a basketball team and Indian club and dumbbell classes became part of the program as well. An Outing Club provided week-long vacations for working women at nearby resorts at prices ranging from a \$2.50 economy week at a farmhouse to a \$9 extravagance at the Ottawa Beach Hotel.

### The Early Years

The success of the Women's Gymnasium and Noon Rest, despite some financial and membership ups and downs, helped pave the way for the founding of the

local YWCA. In the spring of 1900, several of the gymnasium's leading lights, including Dr. Emma Wanty and Mrs. Justina Clay Hollister, began working to rekindle interest in the YWCA concept. At a public meeting on April 10 at the Ladies' Literary Club, Mrs. Hollister's motion to form a YWCA was unanimously carried, and a constitution and slate of officers were adopted on May 16. The purpose of the new association was "to broaden and develop the work so well established by the Women's Gymnasium" and to improve "the physical, intellectual, social and spiritual condition of young women."<sup>3</sup> Voting membership was open to women ages 16 and older who were members of Protestant Evangelical churches; young women who could not claim such church membership were restricted to non-voting status.

Outfitted with the Women's Gymnasium's goodwill, lease, and equipment, the new YWCA opened its doors at 99 Pearl Street and introduced itself to the community with an opening reception described as a "happy success."<sup>4</sup> Then the members of the board rolled up their sleeves and got to work, augmenting the

solid base of the Women's Gymnasium programs with Sunday devotional meetings at Park Congregational Church; the appointment of a Boarding House Committee to recommend reputable rooming establishments; and the expansion of class offerings to include English, German, piano, painting and Bible. By year's end, membership totaled 466, and signs at Union Station directed new arrivals in town to the association's more commodious quarters in the Goodspeed Building on Monroe.

Another equally ambitious and successful year followed in 1901. Class offerings expanded to include sewing, English literature, arithmetic (a mere three enrollees), elocution, vocal music, stenography and, because doctors had determined that women were capable of withstanding the occupational strain, typewriting. The new Department of Domestic Art offered all types of needlework, including dress cutting and fitting, embroidery, and lace work. The Employment Bureau worked to place young women primarily in housekeeping positions, and the School of Domestic Training began offering "scholarshipped" training to



*These Royal Club members photographed in 1904 were part of the larger Royal Circle of factory girls who participated in YWCA classes held at the factory, noon or night, and YWCA gymnasium classes, where appropriate dress was required. (All photos from Grand Rapids YWCA archives, unless otherwise noted.)*





*This 1910 YWCA dining room in the Shepard Building served tasty, affordable lunches and dinners (average meal price 15 cents) primarily to young working women who appreciated the respectability of the establishment. And no escort was required.*

would-be housemaids, cooks and housekeepers. Trainees were housed, fed, and paid \$4 per month for six to twelve months of study/training and then given \$14 upon graduation. The Devotional Committee arranged Sunday worship services, Bible study classes and noon gospel meetings for members and began an outreach to nonmembers, distributing "cards of invitation...to the women in factories, stores, hotels, restaurants, etc."<sup>5</sup> By year's end the Outing Club had decided to extend its activities to winter social events, and the Entertainment Committee had sponsored "nine regular socials... with an aggregate attendance of 967." Membership climbed to 773, lunchroom attendance (lunch and dinner served to unescorted women) jumped from 8,550 in 1900 to 33,402, and total attendance increased from 13,479 to 49,773.<sup>6</sup>

In 1904 came formation of the Industrial Department for the purpose of bringing young women factory employees into "closer relation" with the association. YWCA workers led noon meetings at local factories for both member and nonmember "Industrial Girls," and the participants also came to the YWCA for activities and entertainment.

Early underwriting was supplied by a \$300 gift from Miss Catherine Peck and the pledge of G. J. Johnson, owner of the Johnson Cigar Factory, of \$100 a year toward the salary of a department director.

A year later, the Grand Rapids YWCA, in a pioneering approach subsequently adopted by other YWCAs, established what it called Association Circles at individual factories. The Johnson Cigar Factory Circle came first, followed by felt boot and Clapp clothing factory circles, the Star Association Circle, Mizpah Circle and Royal Circle. Each circle was autonomous within the YWCA, electing its own officers, determining membership and meeting policies, and selecting activities. The Johnson Cigar Factory Circle, for example, organized a chorus class and a gymnasium class, while the Royal Circle concentrated its efforts on Bible study and embroidery classes. By 1921 ten such circles were active, providing a social outlet for the women as well as educational opportunities and regular talks on such topics as health, travel, working conditions, and the eight-hour day. Team sports also provided an outlet for the energies of the Industrial Girls. Basketball was a YWCA team oppor-

tunity from the association's inception. Bowling became a popular activity in the early 1920s, and organized women's baseball began at about the same time.

Like their factory counterparts, the city's women office workers have a history within the YWCA. In 1914 the newly organized Six O'Clock Club featured after-work dinners, programs, and games and attracted between 62 and 92 women to the meetings. Ten years later, the YWCA Business Girls' Club formally organized and by 1934 consisted of nine clubs with 227 members. The groups held twice-monthly dinner meetings, arranged for such noteworthy speakers as an Arctic explorer, and entertained themselves with parties and dramatic skits. Beginning in the early 1920s, they administered an emergency fund for stranded girls that was entrusted to them by the Pan Hellenic Society. Additionally, they maintained a reimbursed scholarship fund to business college, which provided books, tuition, and other expenses. The Business Girls, like the Industrial Girls, existed for decades.

A Traveler's Aid program, run informally at first in cooperation with the Aldrich Deaconess Home, began as early as 1900



when the deaconess met trains arriving at Union Station and directed women traveling alone to safe destinations that included the YWCA. The arrangement was formalized somewhere between 1908 and 1912 when the YWCA agreed to supervise the work and pay the salary of the deaconess, who wore the identification pins of both organizations. The number of women who availed themselves of the service rose from 1,260 in 1912 to 5,541 in 1922, and the program was extended in November 1923 with the placement of a second deaconess at the Michigan Railway Station.

Beginning in 1907, Saturday morning gymnasium classes were offered to girls under 16, and a Girls Department for girls ages 14-18 was instituted in 1910. The local Camp Fire Girls was founded at the YWCA around 1912 and remained under the YWCA umbrella until the formation in 1919 of the Girl Reserves, a program designed for "every younger girl in the city." Aimed at "all school girls and younger girls in business and industry," the Girl Reserves was set up to help its members "face life squarely and to find and give the best."<sup>7</sup> Growth was rapid: 235 girls in 1921, 557 in 1922, 1,137

in 1925, and 1,838 in 1941. Girl Reserves members attended conferences and parties, put on plays, received spiritual guidance, and performed community service that included making holiday baskets and dressing dolls for the Grand Rapids *Herald's* Santa Claus Girls. By 1925, Girl Reserves groups were established in Rockford, Sparta, Cedar Springs, Kentwood, Galewood, Saranac and Middleville and in two rural communities as well.

The 1930s and '40s saw continued growth, along with a name change to Y-Teens in 1946. By the late 1950s, local Y-Teen numbers had swelled to more than 2,000 junior and senior high school girls in 53 clubs, 33 meeting at the YWCA and 20 at Kent County schools. Over the next 15 years, however, the program declined and ultimately ended. In the mid-1970s, Grand Rapids and other YWCAs throughout the country initiated Group Work Departments, offering leadership training, skill training, and such contemporary recreational classes as self-defense to girls ages 15-17. But this program ended as well when participation and finances dwindled in the late 1970s.

## A Home of Their Own

As programs and attendance increased rapidly in the early years, the YWCA outgrew its quarters in the Goodspeed Building on Monroe and in March 1908 moved into the Shepard Building on Fountain at Ionia. With the increased space came a lunchroom expansion; a reading room; a rest room; tub and shower facilities; and a branch of the Grand Rapids Public Library. New classes, such as trade dressmaking, were offered, along with a full roster of events that included Saturday noon musicals and readings, frolics in the gymnasium, a new girls glee club, Thursday night parties, the Wednesday Noon Club, Geneva Outing Club, Sunday vespers services, Bible classes, and Thursday noon services. All for one dollar per year!

It wasn't long before even the new space began to feel cramped. Officials solved the problem temporarily by renting additional rooms in the Shepard Building to accommodate expanding programs, but they soon realized a building of their own was the answer. In 1911 a small group of men – YWCA supporters and the husbands of YWCA board members – purchased property



*Long before the Chicks or any other girls' professional baseball team was organized in Grand Rapids, the YWCA had its Industrial League for girls. This early 1920s photo shows a Bissell team warming up prior to a game with American Seating Company. (Grand Rapids Public Library, Photograph Collection).*



at the northwest corner of Sheldon and Island (now Weston), but construction plans were postponed four times between 1911 and 1919, primarily because of World War I.

The war years prompted a new burst of activities. As women replaced men on several local assembly lines, the Industrial Department was called upon to provide additional noontime recreation and educational meetings at the factories, stretching existing resources to include new needs. In 1918, accomplished local YWCA fund-raisers solicited \$18,000 for the national organization's Women's War Work Council. Local YWCA women also turned their hands to knitting, bandage making, and canteen and hospital service in Grand Rapids and overseas.

In 1919, with the war recently ended, the YWCA board determined that conditions and timing were finally right for moving forward with the downtown building plans. On February 1, 1920, a campaign cabinet, led by board president Grace Dyer Hunting and general chairman and long-term friend and supporter William H. Gay, launched an ambitious \$500,000 fund drive. Enjoying the staunch support of the *Grand Rapids Press*, the *Grand Rapids Herald* and the *Grand Rapids News*, the effort also had the commitment of the board members' husbands, who in December 1919 had agreed that the "city was absolutely ready for the campaign" and had "pledged allegiance to whatever the women decided to do."<sup>8</sup> Not surprisingly, the campaign readily surpassed its goal, attracting 7,000 building subscribers and raising \$567,000 in very short order.

Construction, by Owen-Ames-Kimball, began in November 1920. On May 16, 1921, the 21st

anniversary of the chapter's founding, the cornerstone was laid. Among the articles placed inside were a Bible, daily newspapers, a building subscriber list, a membership roster, printed building campaign materials, bulletins of the Grand Rapids Public Library and local Protestant Evangelical churches, yearbooks of local women's groups, photographs and lists of YWCA board members since 1900, and YWCA histories by Miss Kate Enos and Mrs. John Beattie.

The three days of opening ceremonies and activities to mark completion of the new four-story building commenced on Friday, April 7, 1922, with dinner in the state-of-the-art cafeteria for trustees, board members, and staff. Saturday's events were reserved exclusively for the community's girls and young women, the focus of the organization's services. Approximately 4,000 individuals attended the Sunday open house and inspected the building from basement to roof. The Reverend Charles E. Dean

of St. Mark's read the dedication prayers, and soon-to-be Senator Arthur H. Vandenberg presented the dedication address. His participation may very well have been encouraged by his wife, who was a YWCA board member and avid supporter.

The community must have appreciated the amenities of the building, for YWCA membership soared and building-use statistics shot up. Thousands of women a year availed themselves of the YWCA's traditional education and religious programs, and by 1928, now that space was available, the number of outside community groups using the building had risen to 156. The new swimming pool, still a busy place today, was the first in the area exclusively for girls and women. No longer were YWCA swimmers relegated to the rental swim facilities at Ashton pool and the Armory, and girl's high school swim teams were finally able to enjoy a fine facility for practice and training. The Health Education Department classes, including pool use, developed rapidly

because of the expanded facilities and began emphasizing treatment of such individual health concerns as posture problems and fatigue, anticipating the work of today's YWCA personal trainers. In 1926 the department's enrollment was 2,793 individuals and the year's total attendance was 25,376.

The cafeteria, which at earlier locations was greatly appreciated as a respectable, reasonably priced dining establishment for unescorted women, rapidly became a popular dining spot for individuals and groups that included men. By June of 1922, only two months after opening day, the number of patrons passed the 1,000 mark. By the close of the year, 238,424 meals had been served. Young working

#### OUR DAILY BREAD



*Gert, a now-unknown cartoonist, produced six of these pen and ink drawings in support of the 1920 YWCA building campaign. They appeared February 1-9 in the Grand Rapids Press, each one accompanied by an editorial lauding the campaign.*



women were also welcome to bring their own box lunches to the fourth-floor tearoom where they could purchase beverages and desserts. Afterwards they could avail themselves of the noon rest facility on the lower level. And anyone was able to purchase breads (10 cents and 15 cents a loaf in 1941) and pastries for home.

Grand Rapids YWCA cafeterias had always been profitable, and the new facility was no exception. But by 1926, competition from new downtown eateries prompted the board to modify the menu, paint the walls a brighter color, and add a lunchroom counter. The strategy apparently paid off. Unlike so many other YWCA cafeterias in the United States, the Grand Rapids facility survived the Great Depression. Serious competition again reared its head in the early 1950s when more downtown restaurants opened and the number of YWCA diners diminished. By 1975, sharply escalating losses spelled the cafeteria's eventual doom, and a 1983 renovation converted the space to offices, child-care facilities, and meeting rooms. But testimony to the cafeteria's enduring popularity is the occasional visitor who all these years later inquires at the front desk if the cafeteria is still open and reminisces about the tasty meals served there.

## The Putnam School

Probably the most remarkable program feature of the YWCA's new downtown building was the endowed Caroline W. Putnam Training School, which occupied the second floor and provided community education classes for women of all ages. From its beginning, the YWCA had offered an increasingly sophisticated array of training, recreational and educational classes. A 1907 class called Practical Business Topics

*In 1943, these Grand Rapids women appreciated Putnam School's home repairs class, which taught them home maintenance and repair skills so necessary during World War II absences of husbands, repairmen and materials.*



*Immensely popular supper club classes began as early as 1909 and continued through the mid 1960s. This class took place in 1930 in the YWCA's eight-year-old Putnam School kitchen.*

for Women, for example, touched on banking; the legal status of women; Michigan's tax and industrial laws; investments, stocks and bonds; and life and accident insurance. In 1913, a course in emergencies and nursing was being planned, and 1914 marked the introduction of a salesmanship class for women. What the Putnam endowment accomplished was a permanent support base for a school within the YWCA, which Mrs. Putnam hoped would render women better able to nurture their families. She was passionate about the welfare of girls and especially wished to assist those who had the fewest opportunities.

The funds for the endowment came from the sale of a valuable piece of Monroe Avenue property that Mrs. Putnam willed to the YWCA, and her stipulations were that classes would focus on domestic economy (household skills), that there would be no

gymnasium within the school, that admission would be open to all regardless of ability to pay, and that there would be no denominational restrictions. Ironically, Mrs. Putnam, the YWCA's most generous benefactor, was a Unitarian, not a Protestant Evangelical, and thus could not be a voting member.

Opened in October 1922, the Putnam School offered an almost unimaginable variety of classes – from English for the foreign born and civil service preparation to book discussion groups and courses in millinery, basketry, gardening, table service and china painting – all based on the community's expressed desires and needs. The classes were popular and attendance surged, but significant changes occurred in the wake of the stock market crash of 1929 and the Great Depression that followed. Beginning in 1930, no fees were charged for classes in makeover clothing,



food for limited incomes, and cooking and waitress training; participation in reading and discussion groups was free as well. By 1932 all classes were offered free of charge to all unemployed girls and women. Two-thirds of the work of the 1933 winter term was "absolutely free," according to the annual Putnam Report, and by July of that year, there was discussion of temporary closure. But staff layoffs, salary decreases, increased class size, and other measures kept the school going. Some of the classes – jewelry, etiquette, French and bridge, for example – may seem frivolous in the light of hard times, but they served to distract and temporarily lift the spirits of those in desperate need of employment, and beginning in 1936, men were welcome to attend such classes as dancing and bridge.

During 1935 more than 1,000 unemployed girls and women sought positions, advice, and vocational guidance through the YWCA employment department.<sup>9</sup> Slowly, as the thirties wore on, economic conditions improved and desperation diminished. After United States entry into World War II in 1941, jobs for women opened up in great numbers, and once again Putnam School classes reflected member needs and requests, as evaluated by the YWCA's Data and Trends Committee. Clothing classes, including makeovers from women's to children's and men's to women's, remodeling, tailoring, and creating from scratch, were increased to budgetary limits and filled to capacity. Millinery classes were in great demand, but cooking classes declined, except for the free demonstrations of nutritious, low-cost meals that were run cooperatively with PTAs and held in area schools. A free home repairs course was designed to help women cope in the absence of husbands, workmen, and

materials, and special social gatherings and classes such as English study helped ease the transition for war brides who had accompanied their servicemen husbands back home from distant places.

In addition to the Putnam School activities during the war, the YWCA participated in USO work, reserved a classroom exclusively for Red Cross classes, housed several young Nisei women to keep them from being assigned to internment camps in the west, maintained a housing referral program made even more critical during a time of widespread housing shortages, and supported other YWCA programs and services provided to citizens confined in Japanese internment camps. The local YWCA also raised more than \$16,000 in behalf of the national YWCA Round the World Reconstruction Campaign.

After the war, Putnam School enrollments remained high, with participants ranging in age from young teenagers to great-grandmothers. Classes retained their homemaking emphasis, as Mrs. Putnam had insisted – 37 sewing classes were fully enrolled in 1959. But approximately 25 percent of the offerings were such employment-enhancing courses as business, conversational English, and speech. In 1951, the YWCA initiated its Mothers' Day Out program, a one-day event featuring recreational and Putnam School classes, lunch followed by a speaker, and child care for preschoolers. That same year, the school was relocated to the third floor of the YWCA building. Women continued to flock to the classes, and throughout the 1950s and 1960s the school spilled over into available basement, second-floor, and additional third-floor space.

In 1957, the Putnam School began offering cooperative classes with five local school sys-

tems wishing to begin community education. Eventually these school systems were able to offer more classes at lower prices than the YWCA could afford. Over the coming years, the lure of the suburbs drew significant population from the city's core, urban areas fell victim to decay, and Putnam enrollment began to decline. By 1980 the program centered on training women in what were then such non-traditional trades as carpentry, plumbing, painting, and electrical work. Changing times have spelled the end of that program, too, but the Putnam endowment continues to support ongoing YWCA educational initiatives.

Change also overtook the YWCA's single branch operation. In 1960, the organization purchased property and a building on Eastern Avenue and 44th Street SE and opened the South Metropolitan Association branch. Although the building was well utilized until the late 1960s, successes were not deemed sufficiently strong to justify maintaining the branch, particularly in light of declining attendance and financial difficulties at the downtown YWCA. By the beginning of the 1970s, the YWCA had pledged itself to fostering diversity in its downtown location. Officials believed that branches would dilute efforts to achieve and maintain diversity by draining energy and resources from the central building programs. With reluctance, the board voted to close the branch.

## The Fresh Air Factor

The YWCA's concern for young women's health and its belief in the salubrious nature of the outdoors began with the establishment of the Outing Club by its predecessor organization, the Women's Gymnasium. The benefits of exercise and fresh air for women had been increasingly touted during the last decades





*Camp Newaygo, located on Pickerel Lake, was one component of the YWCAs 100-year-old program of health-enhancing and strength-building recreation for girls and women.*



of the nineteenth century, so it was no surprise in 1900 that the newly formed YWCA continued the Outing Club, which offered wintertime activities beginning in 1902 and arranged summer vacation opportunities for single women.

In May 1910, the YWCA advertised the availability at reasonable rates of a leased cottage at Highland Park in Grand Haven for up to 14 days in July. Five years later, thanks to a legacy by Thomas Peck of Peck's Drug Store fame, the association purchased the cottage and its contents for \$2,240. By 1922 Waubansie Cottage, with its sweeping view of Lake Michigan, had been the destination of 404 young women seeking "healthful and carefully guarded vacations."<sup>10</sup> For those who wished to vacation closer to home, the YWCA rented Point Paulo Cottage in East Grand Rapids in 1919 and Woodcliff Cottage on Reeds Lake in 1920.

Although the popular Waubansie cottage was still self-supporting at the time, the YWCA considered selling it in 1924 and using the proceeds to purchase land and develop a girls camp. Although there were no in-

terested buyers until 1946 when Waubansie was finally sold for \$4,000, the YWCA – using funds from a \$12,500 bequest by Catherine Peck, Thomas Peck's sister – went ahead in August 1926 with the purchase of 15 acres on Pickerel Lake near Newaygo. Camp Newaygo, for girls eight and older, opened in 1927 with five cabins and a main lodge featuring electricity and running water, a wood-fired kitchen stove and an icebox rather than a refrigerator. The fee was \$10 per week.

In 1934 camp privileges were extended to vacationing business girls, and special cabins were reserved for their use. Between 1947 and 1959, camping opportunities for working girls were available on weekends. Beginning in the mid-1970s, women of all ages, no matter what their commitment to fitness, were welcome at the Women's Fitness Camp, a week-long June getaway. The immensely popular My Mom and Me and My Dad and Me camp weekends began in the 1980s along with a few specialty camps such as the 1988 Quest Camp for the deaf. In 1996, however, concerned that the program did not conform to the

association's commitment to achieving diversity, the YWCA board sold Camp Newaygo.

Other YWCA camping experiences included the Stay-At-Home Camp, initiated in 1937 and in later years renamed the Hobby Camp for girls ages 10-12, and Y's Gals, ages 13-15. In the 1980s, these programs evolved into a summer-fun day camp and in-school programs for the children of working parents.

In its early years, the YWCA also ran an off-the-premises residential program. Ever since its founding in 1900, the chapter had been referring young women to approved rooming houses, always planning to own and operate a residence of its own. In September 1906 Caroline and John Bertsch surprised the YWCA by donating their former home at 117 Mt. Vernon Street for the purpose of boarding 20 women. Within weeks the home, known thereafter as Bertsch Hall, was open and occupied. The rules were strict – girls had to be in and the doors locked at 11:15 p.m. – "for Bertsch Hall wishes to mother its girls, and if your own mother were here, she would want you to observe this rule."<sup>11</sup>

By 1919 this always-filled-to-capacity home required such extensive and expensive repairs that the Bertsch Hall Committee began the search for a suitable place on the city's east side where the air might be fresher and the city's undesirable influences diminished. The Webb Academy on Eastern Avenue filled the bill. Purchased in 1921 for \$21,500 and remodeled from woodshed to cupola, the Italianate-style, one-time private residence opened in February 1922. The housemother was a Mrs. Post, whose personal kindness, canned cherries and pears, and monthly birthday parties endeared her to the 23 boarders.<sup>12</sup>

By 1928, many of the boarders



wanted proximity to downtown and the excitement of city life. The YWCA board of directors, concerned with the possible inability of keeping the building fully rented, began investigating relocation possibilities. A new residence did not become a reality, however, until 1942 when Mrs. Frederick P. Wilcox donated the use of her family's Heritage Hill Dutch Colonial Revival-style home; the grounds were expanded in 1943 when Mrs. Carl G. Johnson donated the adjoining lot. With its remarkable decorative and architectural details, among them a Mathias Alten mural on the dining room and reception hall walls, the Wilcox Residence provided gracious yet affordable living for the next four decades. But by 1980 the need for such a facility had vanished. Young women preferred and had the financial means to live in their own apartments, and society no longer frowned upon those who did. The days of the Wilcox Residence ended, but the building continued to be used for other YWCA programs.

### The "One Imperative"

Over the years, the Grand Rapids YWCA has been no stranger to adversity. In the early days, financial shortages cropped up occasionally, but the public's high regard for the association combined with board members' fund-raising abilities helped avert serious problems. Early work with the factory girls, although immensely successful, was not always appreciated, prompting a complaint in the minutes of 1913 that the "girls in the shirtwaist factory were not favorable to the YWCA" and that the staff "was experiencing some difficulty in trying to work among them." Later on, the Great Depression severely tested the YWCA, forcing salary cuts, the release of staff, and the sale of securities.

On the positive side, an early commitment to racial justice and diversity was to shape YWCA programs and policies slowly but inevitably in the decades to come. In 1935, the Grand Rapids YWCA adopted a policy extending membership voting rights beyond the initial Protestant Evangelical limitations. Seven years later, the association board expanded its membership further, voting to "launch out into the field of interfaith relations" and to "assemble representatives of Protestant, Catholic and Jewish faith...and to consider an interfaith organization."<sup>13</sup>

The stated purpose of the local YWCA at the time of its founding was in part to "promote growth in Christian Association character and service," but such intent did not initially include the racial integration of programs and facilities. Although the chapter was founded in 1900, the first indication of African American participation was in 1920 when, "on the advice of Miss Jackson, a colored YWCA worker from the National Board, leaders are being trained among the colored women for work among their own children in our city," in what was perhaps to be a segregated Girl Reserves group.<sup>14</sup> Nothing seems to have come of the initiative, however, but the YWCA's racial

exclusivity was not unusual for the time.

In 1920, virtually all of the 1,000 African Americans who lived in Grand Rapids faced some kind of discrimination. Workers were restricted to menial, low-paying jobs, movie-goers were forced to sit in the balcony, and many restaurants, nightspots, bars and theaters were off-limits altogether. Even children felt the sting, down to being barred from swimming in local school pools.

By the 1930s, growing numbers of African Americans were raising their voices in behalf of racial equality, and several of the community's "colored women" were determined to secure YWCA amenities for themselves and their families. One letter to the YWCA in 1935 requested information on the "policy of the Association in receiving colored women into various classes," but there is no indication she ever received a response.<sup>15</sup> A month later, Mrs. Walter Coe, vice president of the Interdenominational Missionary Union and identified in YWCA minutes as a "Negro woman," asked if she would be allowed to hold a luncheon for the group's officers at the YWCA. The board agreed that Mrs. Coe, the wife of the Grand Rapids Police Department's first black captain, should



*Wilcox Residence in Heritage Hill was the YWCA's third boarding house. The architectural details and Mathias Alten mural were typical of all three facilities' attractive natures. And the prices were right.*



be given access to a private dining room.

Whether the board's decision represented a change in attitude or a perfunctory accommodation, it was nevertheless an important first step at a time when the amended YWCA purpose included such lofty phrases as "a fellowship of women and girls," "ideals of personal and social living," and "love for all people." Pressing forward, the YWCA board in February 1936 approved building use by young African American girls for tap dancing, and in 1938 a Girl Reserves Club was established for African American participants. In May of that same year, the board voted to establish a committee, made up of board members, Girl Reserves and Industrial Committee members, and Negro and community representatives, to determine what role the YWCA could play in bringing about improved understanding of interracial community problems.

In the early 1940s, 52 African Americans participated in the Girl Reserves, a few African American women served on YWCA committees, an average of five African American women enrolled in Putnam classes each year, and the YWCA urged the Kent County Defense Council to include African American and labor representation. All of this seems to have occurred without incident.

Use of the swimming pool, however, was an entirely different story. Beginning in 1940, the YWCA had quietly begun allowing African American girls to use the pool, which operated under the aegis of the YWCA's Health Education Department. Even though no mixed-race swimming took place, negative reaction, in some cases coming from board members' friends, greeted the experiment. Determined that a firm response was needed, the YWCA leadership requested a

report from Dr. Ruth Herrick, YWCA Health Department examining physician for the past 10 years, on the "supposed danger of syphilitic infection" being spread by African American swimmers. Her reasoned medical conclusion, presented to the board in February 1942, was that "we have no more of a venereal disease problem with a group of Negro girls than with white girls."<sup>16</sup>

Nine months later came the anticipated recommendations from the Health Education Department and the Girl Reserves that all YWCA facilities, including the formerly segregated Health Education Department, be open to African American girls and women. National YWCA had cautioned Grand Rapids to move more slowly, and there was still some covert disagreement at the board level. Nevertheless, the Grand Rapids board approved the recommendations, declaring the YWCA's readiness to "maintain its stand as one of its responsibilities toward breaking down racial discrimination."<sup>17</sup> The Grand Rapids YWCA adopted its policy of racial integration five years before Major League Baseball and six years before the United States Armed Services broke their own strictly imposed color lines.

Although documents in 1943 expressed disappointment that the African American response was not greater, YWCA leaders were proud of what they deemed their most significant accomplishment that year—blazing the trail to board integration through the appointment of Mrs. A. C. Keith, who had formerly served on a YWCA committee. By 1949, the YWCA workforce was minimally integrated, committee membership reflected greater diversity, and the Grand Rapids YWCA was about to elect Helen Claytor as its first African American board president. Not only



*Grand Rapids' Helen Claytor was the first African American president of a U.S. community YWCA, and later president of the National YWCA. (Grand Rapids Public Library Photo Collection)*

was Claytor the first African American president of any community YWCA in the United States, but in 1967 she would become the first African American to be elected president of the National YWCA.

Helen Claytor's ground-breaking election to the local board presidency in 1949 was not without intrigue and drama. A small contingent of board members attempted to thwart the will of the majority by surreptitiously approaching another board member to stand for election. Upon learning of the intended deceit, the proposed candidate immediately withdrew and proclaimed her support for Mrs. Claytor, whereupon four board members resigned, declaring that a Negro president would harm their husbands' businesses!<sup>18</sup>

The late 1940s and early 1950s brought African American enrollment increases in Health Education and Putnam classes from 58 participants in 1948 to 136 in 1953. A memo written in the late 1950s emphasized the need for Y-Teen Clubs to become as inclusive of the host school's population as possible, thereby "ensuring that homogenous clubs



will have the enriching experience of knowing girls of other backgrounds."<sup>19</sup> During the early 1960s, programs to increase the appreciation and knowledge of other cultures accompanied the more traditional offerings. Also added to the schedule were a Public Affairs Committee presentation on Michigan's minimum wage law, equal pay for equal work, migrants, and daycare for working mothers; classes and activities for at-risk, low-income grade school children and mothers; and panel discussions on such topics as teenage marriage, school dropouts and delinquency. This commitment to community service continued throughout the decade.

In 1967, the YWCA National Convention adopted a new purpose, above all adjuring members to "respond to the barrier-breaking love of God" as they "drew together into responsible membership women and girls of diverse experiences and faiths, that their lives may be open to new understanding and deeper relationships, and the struggle for peace and justice, freedom and dignity for all people." This new purpose signaled a process of institutional renewal and reinvigoration, which in Grand Rapids translated to a focus on women's rights, civil rights, and, to a lesser extent, peace and environmental concerns.

As Helen Claytor, one of their own, stepped into the spotlight as president of the national organization, the board and committees of the Grand Rapids YWCA dedicated themselves to diversity beyond what had already been achieved. After undergoing an institutional racism evaluation to measure their success, they began devising and utilizing new in-depth leadership training programs for staff and volunteers. The major thrust of the effort was to increase racial understanding within the as-

sociation and throughout the community.

Women's issues also remained a high priority. The YWCA showed films about smoking dangers and breast cancer to members, continued its interest in abortion reform, studied the issues surrounding mature women returning to work, and participated in task forces dealing with the status of women and methods to bring about improvements. In addition to existing programs for low-income, underserved city children, the YWCA introduced Summer in the City, a creative-arts project at four inner-city centers taught by YWCA-trained youth. The YWCA also worked with public and private Kent County schools to develop a comprehensive sex education program.

By the end of the decade, the ripple of impending change that gathered momentum at the 1967 national convention was about to turn into a tidal wave. In a momentous decision born of tumultuous times, the 1970 YWCA National Convention adopted the so-called "One Imperative," in support of civil rights, amid tears, cheers, and some apprehension. Returning delegates told of sleepless nights, political floor fights, intense discussion, and vehement disagreement between young Turks and the old guard. But when all was said and done, a heightened sense of enthusiasm and purpose prevailed as all of the local associations made the commitment to "thrust our collective power towards the elimination of racism, wherever it exists and by any means necessary."

In the minds of some, the statement was reminiscent of the inflammatory words of Malcolm X. But YWCA officials assured the public that the intent was to look within the association, evaluate all components, and bring about changes – such as diversifying committees – which would then

enable the YWCA to approach other community organizations and encourage them to take similar actions toward desegregation.

Meanwhile, the Grand Rapids YWCA continued to offer new opportunities, including classes for female inmates at the Kent County Jail and scholarships for 60 girls to attend Camp Newaygo. The association also developed a "new white consciousness" awareness program, adopted an affirmative action plan, housed a summer employment agency for teens, welcomed Association for the Blind swimmers and provided a program for single parents completing high school diplomas.

But all was not well during the decade. Declining cafeteria revenues, sagging Putnam School enrollments, and the closing of the South Metropolitan Association branch created financial shortfalls. Budget restrictions relegated the youth program to an on-again, off-again status, membership numbers remained low in the wake of urban rioting and competition from other community organizations, and the two-year Living Arts Program for pre-delinquent teens was an undisciplined disaster that frightened off many YWCA members and supporters.

To make matters worse, the local United Fund (today's United Way) threatened to withhold funding from the YWCA for the last half of 1971 because of an ill-timed membership-drive announcement in violation of United Fund and member agency agreements. The problem was resolved when the YWCA, a United Fund member since 1942, began to assemble and implement more businesslike operation plans, as stipulated.

The Grand Rapids YWCA attracted negative United Fund attention again in 1973 when the national organization's convention in San Diego took a strong



position in favor of gun control. Local sportsmen's groups besieged the United Fund, threatening to withhold support should the measure pass. United Fund rushed a telegram to the local YWCA delegation, alerting its members to the home situation, but the delegates would not be dissuaded and were later called on the carpet repeatedly for their stand. The YWCA was equally adamant in refusing to consider United Fund's strong recommendation to merge with the YMCA.

In seeking to resolve its difficult financial issues, the YWCA adopted the same strategy that had served so consistently and successfully for decades: It looked to answer unmet community needs and to fill the niches awaiting new services. In 1976, for example, the YWCA joined a community task force to study the problem of battered women. Out of that initiative emerged the Domestic Crisis Center, established by the YWCA in 1977 to treat women and children who are the victims of battering and lauded by United Way, area police forces, and social service agencies ever since. That same year saw the creation of TRIBUTE!, the annual event honoring contemporary women who had made or were making remarkable contributions to the community. In 1980 the YWCA domestic violence shelter found a permanent home. Two years later the Child Sexual Abuse Center, which was soon to become a national model, opened its doors to families devastated by incest. On an entirely different note, the association recognized both the need for ongoing fund raising and the value of positive exposure. The Chocolate Lover's Festival, one of the YWCA's few frivolous events, began its ten-year lifespan in

1982. Following in 1986 was Run, Jane, Run, originally a multi-event fund-raiser which encouraged and celebrated women's sports participation.

The dawn of a new decade brought forth additional programs based on community needs. In 1990 the Sexual Assault Program, which offers immediate post-rape victim support and advocacy, moved from Community Mental Health to the YWCA. EncorePLUS debuted in 1994 to encourage low-income women to overcome their reluctance to seek cancer screenings. The Nurse Examiner Program opened in 1996 and soon became a state model, providing confidential rape examinations in a victim-focused medical setting. Project HEAL followed in 1997, providing transitional housing, employment, advocacy, and legal services to women and children leaving domestic violence shelters; a component of this program likewise achieved state-model status. The accreditation for its counseling services granted by the Council on Accreditation of Services for Families and Children in 1997 affirmed that the YWCA had met the highest North American standards of professional performance. Now in 2001, reinstitution of girls' programming is being planned for at-risk girls ages 9-17.

Architectural modifications of the association's 1922 building to accommodate all of this growth and change were made possible through a series of three capital

campaigns – in 1983, 1986 and 1992 – generously supported once again by the Grand Rapids community. One of the original visions for the building was that it be made a "center of women's activities, perhaps having one or two floors devoted to offices for women doctors and other professional women and that the building be called the Women's Community Center."<sup>20</sup> Fittingly, that long-standing dream was realized in 1992 when the Junior League, the Women's Resource Center and Grand Rapids Opportunities for Women (GROW) moved into the YWCA building and became residents of the Center for Women.

As the Grand Rapids YWCA moves into the new millennium, it will be guided by its new mission statement: "to empower women, promote diversity and advocate for justice and equality." And as it continues to translate its purpose into programs and policy, its future achievements will mirror those of the past and will inspire succeeding generations to echo the enthusiasm of Grand Rapids *Press* columnist Ella Mary Sims, who once wrote, "Conditions may change in our society, but the goals and purposes of the YWCA are just as relevant and timely today as they ever were. This organization brings together women and girls of all faiths, experiences, and backgrounds, and tries to meet their needs in a changing world."<sup>21</sup>

## About the author:

Marilyn Martin is a long-time YWCA volunteer and former board member. For the past two years she served as the association's historian/archivist. In 1999-2000, she chaired the Grand Rapids YWCA Centennial Celebration Committee.



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