A woman's place is in the Y: The beginning of the NYWA in Williamsport

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In 1855, in New York City, the Ladies Christian Association established the first United States location for the Young Women's Christian Association movement.

Over the years, the organization developed programs for young women who moved from rural life to city jobs, reaching out to African-American and Native-American women as well. The program also stressed physical fitness, a time when young women were considered too frail for such activities. The Boston chapter offered the city's first calisthenics classes and installed pelvis weights on the backs of chesty girls so that girls could continue to exercise while in the city. The YWCA has been a pioneer in social, economic, educational, and political themes for women and gave them a collective voice as they sought new roles and lifestyles in a changing society.

The YWCA comes to Williamsport

Lloyd's "History of Lycoming County" says it best: "The YWCA has grown out of the willingness of a few, and it is now the responsibility of all, to assume the responsibility for womankind."

Throughout the years, the YWCA has been a champion for the rights of young women. Today, the organization continues to work towards empowering women and girls around the world. The YWCA has been at the forefront of issues such as ending violence against women, promoting education and economic opportunities, and fighting for gender equality.

Established in 1855 in New York City, the YWCA has spread its reach across the United States and around the world, providing programs and services that help young women and girls reach their full potential.

Lifestyle

Showcased in this photo from the Lycoming County Historical Society is the YWCA Walnut Street branch. Above right are captains of the YWCA campaign team and administrators from 1913. Shown are (from left) Young, Mrs. D.L. Furey, J. Romane Way, Mrs. Emma Dunham, Elese Smith, Anna Gilmore, Mrs. A.K. Carrothers, Mrs. H.F. Simon, William P. Beeber, Robert H. Thorne, J.H. Foreman, Fannie Page, Mrs. Robert F. Gibson, H. Melick Foreman, Anna McClure, Alice G. Gibson, Charles C. Krouse, Dr. Saylor Brown and Mrs. Edgar Munson. The picture hangs in the Williamsport YWCA board room.

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establish a local YWCA, the Rev. James Carter chaired an organizational meeting on Jan. 17, 1895, in the parlor of the Second Presbyterian Church, for women who were concerned about the welfare of young girls in the city of Williamsport. The newly created board elected Mrs. James Carter as president.

In her brief history of the board, Mrs. P.E. Mason described the women as "hard-working, dedicated and straightforward thinkers," with progressive views.

The board put a constitution together, rented space in the Sampson's Trust Co. for $10 a month and hired a secretary for $1 a month.

The group's original name, The Woman's YWCA of Williamsport, would change to the Young Women's Christian Association for the beginning of the year.

The board minutes described meetings that began with scripture reading and prayer, outlined ambitious goals and recorded contributions and door counts for the immensely overcrowded number of activities.

Services expanded

A small library, started with reading material donated by the Boss Club, attracted factory girls to daily "noon rest periods" at the facility, where they were given coffee and tea donated by Mrs. Stearns. Bible study, business, physical fitness and sewing classes followed. Within a year, the membership was close to 30 women, and the year's door count was 1,750.

A diverse group of women's organizations found a home at the YWCA. Two of the most vital were the Organization of the Industrial Girls and the Business and Professional Women's Club. The Red Cross offered classes there, and the YWCA became the official arm of the "Travellers' Aid Society." In the early 1930s, 400 girls assembled to register for the YWCA sponsored Girl Scouts, and were treated to a circus, a vaudeville show, a mock wedding and a proof of an exercise class and peanut butter sandwiches.

Safe housing was an immediate need for young women new to the city. Providing rooms for permanent and temporary transients became a priority for the YWCA. An informal group of young women met in a formal employment agency. A nursery, started with money raised by the Clio Club, benefited working mothers. It opened in 1913, with a charge of $1 per cent.

The cafeteria, also opened in 1913, provided well-balanced meals to the community as well as young girls. Meal items costing more than 10 cents were prohibited. The YWCA charted the first cafeteria in Williamsport, but it also was one of the few respectable places a woman could eat. It was not wise for a woman to risk her safety and reputation by frequenting a tavern. The YWCA held exercise classes and hosted scheduled basketball games. The former Dickinson Seminary, now Lycoming College, opened its swimming pool to the YWCA. Other health initiatives, such as the "Good Shoe Campaign" with the sign, "Save a Foot," encouraged women to choose sensible shoes. The sharing of health information and offering of health classes taught by Dr. John Snyder Brown formed the basis for developing more formal health services, as well as coordinating the city's visiting nurses.

The YWCA presented programs on working issues such as an eight-hour work week, personal grooming and religion at their central location, and the YWCA took programs into local churches and factories.

One of the first fundraising efforts, in 1896, was a street car party. Frequent rummage sales provided some steady income, as did "Y" Sundays, when church collection plates were designated for the YWCA. Membership drives were held at churches and local imbibing places both raised funds and helped to explain the value of the YWCA. Starting in 1929, the YWCA benefitted greatly from The Community Chest, a fundraising organization that collected money from local business and distributed it among local charities.

Finding a home for the Williamsport YW

Through its first few decades, the YWCA changed its location several times as its programs expanded and the need for housing grew. After renting space in various places, in 1913, the board launched a capital campaign, and with the funds raised bought and remodeled the former Crawford Hotel at 18 E. Third St.

By the early 1950s, it was obvious to YW leaders that a larger and more suitably equipped space was needed. A new chapter for the YWCA was about to begin, as the board considered property locations and fundraising for this major venture.

For a detailed history of the early years of the Williamsport YWCA, consult a paper by Marjorie M. Hayen, written in 1959, for a senior capstone history class at Lycoming College. It is available through the Lycoming County Women's History Collection at www.lycominglibrary.org.

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