A woman’s place is in the Y: First years at 815 W. Fourth St.

By JANET McNELLE HURLBERT

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The newly designed Women’s Christian Association (WCA) building was dedicated on June 26, 1938, and was open for business on July 1. Citizens of Williamson County had already received a preview of the site of the first headquarters through an article in the local L.L. Steuer & Sons publication “Store and Home Review.” Superlative adjectives described the “up-to-the-minute” gymnasium equipment and the installation of “one of the most beautiful in the country.”

The swimming pool boasted a filtration system that ensured “absolutely pure water.” There would be a large reception porch on each side of the front entrance, as well as eight club rooms and two classrooms, accompanied by an outdoor patio for use during mild weather. The dining room with an adjoining well-equipped kitchen would start serving breakfast at 6:30 a.m. and end the day with dinner at 7:30 p.m. Permanent reading rooms on the third and fourth floors would have access to a kitchen, laundry facilities and parlors. Transient visitors would be housed on the second floor, a room and a boarder completed the amenities.

The first year

As the first year of operation drew to a close, the local newspaper ran an editorial that read: “The WCA program has become a vital, important and necessary force in the religious, civic, economic and social life of the city.”

The WCA’s annual report for 1936 was more than 30 pages long. Each page outlined information about the activities and outreach of the many committees, which included both staff and volunteer members.

The health committees published a brochure titled “More Air, More Health and More Spirit!”—advertising all the fitness offerings.

For $1, a woman could use the gymnasium facilities once a week; for five weeks, provided that she was a WCA member, completed a physical and bought her own gym suit. The calendar included basketball, practice and test games for the Sunday School Basketball League, composed of eight teams.

A “Business Girls’ Gym” class offered “an hour of healthy living,” and a class called “Watch That Shape!” encouraged weight reduction. A “shave” in the pool was included in many activities, and there was a long list of swimming classes. The dance schedule offered everything from tiny tots to rhythm dancing to ballroom dancing.

Outlook and social service

Outlook, included visitors to local factories and stores to promote the YMCA service of the Business Girls’ Spring Banquet, and the first Al-Industrial Spring Banquet were a few of the many community dinners held at the YMCA. Members supported the University during a long health drive and, through this, the pool was included in many activities, and there was a long list of swimming classes. The dance schedule offered everything from tiny tots to rhythm dancing to ballroom dancing.

A statement near the end of the 1936 annual report summarized the spirit of the YMCA during this time of depression and challenge. “Some of you may think of the WCA as a residence, or a swimming pool or gym or as a dancing room, or merely as a building which is architecturally beautiful. It is so much more than any of these — it is the greatest women’s movement in the world. To be a part of such a movement — to be one of the millions who are sharing in its work — is truly a privilege.”

For a variety of the Williamson County WCA during this period, consult a research paper by Brenda L. Georgiut, written in 1990, for a senior capstone history course at Limestone College. It is also available through The Limestone County Women’s History Collection.

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In this photo courtesy of the Limestone County Women’s History Collection, are the elected WCA officers for 1938. Mrs. William Hunter, Mrs. Edine Weir, Mrs. F.M. Lindsay, Mrs. L.W. Waymouth and Mary Meggetson.

Every state in the Union, Canada, and London. A promotional brochure, "Come Here and You'll Never Remember Home Again," boasted, "The WCA is not only a safe place to stay, but also the best place in town for fun and relaxation. Enjoy the company of new friends, inspiration and opportunity for service." 

Citing scholars who were experiencing financial difficulties always was a priority, which was especially significant during the 1936 flood in the Williamson area.

Stay at Home Camp for Girls

The early 1930s brought the Stay at Home Camp for Girls. The day began at 9 a.m. with devotions and singing, followed by milk dusting and field activities. Swimming and swimming provided a fun lunch and a rest period, with lots of provided. Stereotypes of the area included such terms as sycamore, beaver and walnut. The women were given a quick lesson in storytelling, handwriting and the signing of camp songs. A final "farewell to the pool" concluded the day at 6 p.m.

Speaker’s Bureau

In 1936, the WCA formed a new department called the Speaker’s Bureau. Its purpose was to serve the community with the women who were seeking new speakers. It also was a method of marketing all the WCA services by introducing people to these well-published figures. Topics ranged from history, literature and biology to birds and nature, with frequent book lectures. One guest speaker addressed "The American Negro" and another talked about "Americanization and Immigration."

Depression years

The WCA was not immune to the economic struggles of the 1930s. Unfortunately, the Depression meant that not all doors could honor their pledges for the construction of the new WCA. In order to cover larger-than-expected mortgage payments, members organized many rumpages and baked goods sales, held card parties, and sold tickets to events. From the very beginning, the board realized the need to establish an endowment and also encouraged donations to maintain the levels paid by the interior operations of the new building. In a tightening economy, membership decreased, at one point dipping to half of the previous year’s total. In order to survive, the WCA had to cut salaries and cash operating expenses by 40 percent.

A determination for the Barnes News, which served as a forum for the WCA. Through this, the WCA provided support to the community. Working together in harmony, the volunteers and staff would study the needs of the girls of the city and provide for them in every way possible.

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